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SIX-FOOT SOL, THE SHARP-SHOOTER;



"THREE, FOUR," CONTINUED SIX-FOOT SOL, WATCHING THEIR RETREATING STEPS WITH A BROAD GRIN ON HIS BATTERED FACE.

OR,

Johnny on the Spot

A STORY OF GRIZZLY GULCH.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE DUDE DETECTIVE," "THE
ALL-AROUND SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BOY WITH SAND.

"CLICK!" as the hammer went back.
"Don't be a fool, kid!"
"Fool ain't in it. I've got you foul."
"But see hyer. Yer da'ssn't shoot, an' ef yer don't git out ov ther way I'll smash yer."

"Just as soon shoot as not. When it comes to that you'll find me on the spot."

"But they'd hang yer."

"Now, you are bluffing, old man. The man that shoots you is all paid for. So, come down, old man; I have you fine."

The two were alone in the stable at the rear of the station at Peddler's Pocket.

There would have been a marked disparity between them had it not been for one thing.

The gun in the hands of an expert makes all men equal, and the "kid" had the other lined.

He was dressed after a natty fashion which hardly seemed the right thing in those regions, and his face actually had an effeminate appearance, with its clear pink and white, and just the faintest suspicion of mustache, betokening that he had not yet been under the barber's hands.

But his eye was bright and fearless as a hawk's, and his white, slender hand never wavered as he held his ivory-handled, gold-plated revolver in true line.

The other was a burly ruffian, desperado seemingly written all over his outward self, yet with a crafty, shifty look in his washed-out orbits, betokening that, when put to the test, he might not try out altogether "dead game."

A few moments before another man had left the stable, and after a little interval of waiting this ruffian, at present sailing under the name of Keno Charley, was about to pass out at the other end, but before him suddenly rose the lad, his finger on the trigger, and a call on his lips, which, in that country, was never disregarded when the drop went with it.

Keno Charley's hands went over his head, and his first question to himself was whether the unknown youth had heard the late conversation.

Then ensued the colloquy as given.

"Fine it is, then. What do yer want? Ef it's coin, you're away off. Ef I hed it, I wouldn't be hyer," retorted the big fellow, sulkily.

"Coin? Great Jingo! What do you suppose I want with coin? It's knowledge I'm after. Who was your friend?"

Keno Charley gave a start. The conference had been observed, then!

"Blamed ef I know; but I reckon he might be a heap-sight piuser man, an' then not git ter glory."

"And what did he say?"

"Axed how fur it war to Grizzly Gulch, an' how he'd find ther walkin'."

"You lie! He gave you instructions and gold. Keep the oro, but tell me what he said, or your brains spatter the stall."

Perhaps it was only a bluff, but it looked like the sure enough article.

This youngster seemed to know everything, utter stranger though he was, and little as he looked like one acquainted with the men and ways of the mining camps.

"Take yer gun down an' I'll tell yer ther hull blessed truth—an' ef that thing happened ter go off you'd never know."

"And if I did take it down I'll swear I'd never know that, or anything else. No, no, Charley! Warble your little song as you are, and I'll relieve the pressure afterward."

"Honest gospel, then," growled Keno, desperately. "He told me the hearse would be held up between hyer an' Grizzly Gulch, and advised me to keep my hands up and mouth shut."

"Whereabouts on the line?"

"Five mile this side, jest afore we strike ther down grade."

"And what in the name of wrath does he choose this trip for? Why don't he go for the antiquated tumbrel when it is coming out with a full treasure box?"

"Dunno, unless he's going fur you."

"Something in that. All right. Keep your eyes open when the pinch comes, or you will hear something drop. So long! as they say in this country."

Without a sign that he thought of the man, the lad put away his revolver, and, turning, made his way back to the station, where the guests were just arising from the dinner table.

Half an hour later the coach came rolling up to the door, and on the box, lines in hand, was Keno Charley—the driver.

The passengers filed out to the side of the stage, and they went so unanimously there was an easily seen reason for it. The "hearse" for Grizzly Gulch that day was to carry at least one passenger of peculiar importance.

Miss Myrtle Mabilee on this advanced parallel of development was too gorgeous even for a dream; and she would have been a revelation and a beauty in an Eastern metropolis.

She came out between Judge Jack Johnson and Deacon Westbridge, whilst Sport McKenzie, or Sport Mac, as he was familiarly called, and Abiram Weintzheimer gnashed their teeth in the immediate rear. Not one of the four had ever set eyes on the young lady previous to that morning, but she had made them all her obsequious slaves, and each was burning to distinguish himself in her service.

Their very anxiety and distrust of each other caused them to overlook another element, which brought them to grief.

As they approached the stage a natty-looking youth of perhaps eighteen, dressed up to the nines, threw open the door, gracefully caught her fingers, which were mechanically extended, and with the very softest of "Allow me's" handed her into the coach.

Then, without a pause, he followed immediately after, and sank into the seat by her side, which had, all that morning, been deferentially vacant.

"Holy Aprahams! Vot gaul!" hissed Weintzheimer, who was a money-lender by profession, and old enough to be the young lady's grandfather, but who was known to have a soft heart for the fair sex, if for nothing else on earth.

Deacon Westbridge held up his hands in scandalized horror, and Sport McKenzie chewed almost too viciously at his drooping, bronze mustache.

Only the judge, as was usual with him, "kept his head," and climbed into the next best seat without a show of vexation. It was a cold day when he was entirely left.

"Hello, kid, ain't yer kimin' up whar yer was?" exclaimed Keno Charley from his perch on the seat, and bending over to look in the coach.

"Not this trip, Charley. They say there's some roughish bits of road along the trail, especially about the down grade to Grizzly. If you hit a rock it might bounce me off; and I'm not sure the insurance money would console the widow or go far with the kids."

The driver gave a snort of disgust, whilst Miss Myrtle laughed merrily as the coach moved off at that moment.

"I can imagine the widow," she said; "but, judging from your appearance, I should suppose the kids were mighty callow. Are they twins?"

"Perhaps so. To tell the truth, they won't arrive for five years yet; but it's

as well to begin to look after their interests now. Get used to it, you know, by the time they are on the spot. That's what takes me down to Grizzly Gulch. Want to see what chance there would be to make my own living if I should happen to be left a family man with a large circle of dependent relatives."

"Verily, young man, hast thou ever thought it might be thy fate to be called first?" snuffed the deacon, away off in the farthest corner, and in sufficiently bad a humor to feel like moralizing.

"If so it happens, I reckon my descendants won't suffer," spoken over the heads of McKenzie and the judge, as he turned again to Miss Myrtle.

She evidently encouraged the lad, whilst she held the four at a conversational distance; and all that afternoon no one would have thought the lad had a care on his mind beyond Miss Myrtle.

But, all the same, he was on the alert; and just as a shout arose from the left hand side of the coach he thrust his head out on the right, and, with his weaponed hand reaching upward, shouted:

"Twirl your whip, Charley, and drive through 'em, or I'll spatter the hearse with the best brains you've got. I'm on the spot, and I mean biz!"

CHAPTER II.

THE DANGER GROWS.

With Keno Charley in the secret, the road-agents had no doubt that the hearse would haul up at the first hail, although the road stretched away perfectly clear and unobstructed.

As for Charley, the gun at his ear, into the muzzle of which he had that day already looked, clicked ominously, and the holder, as he had remarked, was "on the spot!" The interview at Peddler's Pocket station had brought him somewhat under control, and the sudden, unexpected order was obeyed without the least intention on his part.

Out went the long lash, curling around to touch every back its length would reach, and with a great shout from lad and driver the teams sprung madly away, as from either side of the road men rose up, and there was a rattle of firearms, and a madder bound than ever, as one of the horses felt a sharp score on its flank.

The hat of the lad lifted slightly from his head, but fell to its place again as he drew in at least two-thirds of his length through the window.

"Now," he remarked, coolly, "if the brake beam holds on the down grade, and the fiery chargers don't fly the track, we will sup in splendor at Grizzly, and meantime there will be no flies on us. These boasted road-agents don't half come up to a Bowery slugger."

"But, my! what was it all about?" exclaimed Miss Mabilee, who had clasped her hands together, but who neither lost her head nor was overcome with nervousness.

"Evidently an attempt at a hold-up; but the less said about it the less danger of breaking down over the strain when we come to think of the chance of pursuit."

"Don't worry about that, miss," put in Sport Mac; "for I tell you that Captain Zip is not that kind. When he misses the turn he just let's it go at that and lays back for the next deal. But I reckon it won't be healthy for the young gent if a second meeting happens very soon," and the sport gave rather an admiring look as he spoke, for the youngster's act had saved him a rather full pocketbook.

"Mine crayshus! vosh dot Zip? Let me oud! I wantsh ter valk. When he coomes back he fills dish hearsh so full

of holes as von shkimmer," and he sprang up so hastily that he thumped his head against the coach roof.

That banged him down on the seat again, and at the same moment a lurch of the coach seemed to double him up and cast his head into the bread-basket of the deacon, who was just turning to look at him.

Westbridge had the vocal twang of a saint, but the fist of a prize-fighter. His fingers were instantly in Abiram's hair.

"Infernal Hebrew, thou art come to the wrong shop. Take that, and that, and it is lucky the restraining power of the presence of the softer sex prevents its being worse."

In about one minute by the clock he shook up Abiram so successfully that his spectacles were gone, his hair stood on end toward every quarter of the compass, his nose was bleeding, his coat was ripped up the back, his false teeth were over in Miss Myrtle's lap, and he was gasping like a dying calf.

The deacon had had it in for him about a year, and this was the first chance he had found to get even with him. That was the reason he took occasion, as he remarked, to improve the opportunity.

The fracas momentarily diverted the attention of the rest of the passengers from their own condition—which was none of the pleasantest had they only known it.

Desperado though he had been, Keno Charley was an able driver, and if his horses were getting away with him it was not his fault.

In the beginning the coach rolled smoothly enough, so it was no wonder there was little alarm among passengers used to being driven at a headlong pace.

Later on the road grew rougher, and by the time the scrimmage between the deacon and Abiram was over, even the usually careless face of McKenzie wore a sober expression as he looked out from the window and noted the speed with which the teams were dashing down the rapidly steepening decline.

Bang! The wheel of the coach struck a boulder by the roadside, and had it not been for the peculiar shape of the obstruction the wreck would have come at once.

The vehicle swayed to the left as though it would dash over the precipice on that side. Then the traces tightened with a jerk that fairly snapped the coach through the air, and one of the wheelers stumbled.

If he had gone fairly down there would have been no escape from a pile-up; but, with an energy almost of despair, Keno Charley ground down his brake and slung his whip-lash at the leaders.

A trifling check from behind, a wilder leap from the leaders, and the stumbling horse was actually swung once more into his stride, and went plunging on.

There were few women with such nerve as Miss Myrtle Mabilee, even in the land where women with nerve are bred, but the plucky girl now quivered, and her voice quavered as she spoke in a low tone to the youth.

"We seem to be in more danger from the rocks than we would have been from the road-agents. They could hardly have treated us as cruelly as we are threatened. Can we escape with life?"

"I don't know the road, but if Keno hangs on we may pull up in safety yet. Where I came from we don't die till we're killed."

"But we are in quick danger. If anything happens to me, take charge of my baggage, read the letter you will find there, and act accordingly."

"All right. This ain't a case where brains counts for much on the inside. I can't promise to save you; but rely on it that I'll do the square thing. Hello!"

Those sharp eyes of his had caught a glimpse of something which he knew by instinct was Keno Charley taking a flying leap from the top of the coach into a clump of shrubbery by the roadside!

There was no time for wasting. Whether the others had seen the jump or not, the lad's eyes took in the desertion, and his course was decided on in the same flash of thought.

"Stick to the machine till the last horn blows," he hastily whispered to the girl, who was still leaning toward him; then swiftly he arose, and, leaning out of the window, grasped the guard rail, and, taking a firm grip, drew himself bodily through the window!

As he emerged there was a great surge, which seemed to cast him into the air with a snap, and for an instant his feet went out to a level with his head.

Miss Mabilee gave a little cry as she saw him apparently being hurled to his death, and the other passengers, save Abiram, seemed to be actually cowering under the hand of relentless danger.

As for Weintzheimer—he was groveling under the middle seat. This sort of peril broke him all up.

Sport Mac was the coolest there. It was his business to be cool, and he was feeling for his revolvers with some idea of dropping a leader to stop the procession, and run the chances of going over into the brink.

Just when Myrtle expected to see him dashed against the side of the stage and crumpled to the cruel roadway, the boy, with a wonderful exercise of nerve, swung his feet around, higher than his head, and landed on the upper deck!

Keno Charley had been at least cool enough to wrap the lines around the handle of the brake-bar before taking his leap, and the young Ajax caught them up as he dropped into the vacated seat of the driver.

"Keno! Johnny's on the spot! Let's see what he can do for his country!"

And he gave a long, strong, steady pull—to feel the mouths of the flying brutes.

One of the lines parted under the strain, and he surged backward in his seat.

CHAPTER III.

JOHNNY ON THE SPOT.

That seemed an end of all control of the runaways, but the daring boy was not cowed.

With a swiftness almost mechanical he kicked off his gaiters, and, setting the brake as hard as he dared, he pitched forward from his seat, straight upon the back of the off wheeler!

The teams had passed down the greater part of the incline in safety, but the boy, a stranger to the trail, did not know that, nor that the most dangerous part of the route was yet to come.

What he did know was that below him, at some distance, he heard a horn sounding, and had caught a glimpse of another coach toiling up the hill.

What was to be done had to be done quickly. Before many seconds the collision would come unless by some means it was averted.

Even the insane brutes seemed to feel something of the kind—or was it all a fancy? Their pace slackened a trifle, and the coach, never responding to the heavy pressure of the brake, bore hard on the wheelers.

The young Ajax was not without an instant plan. The remaining three lines

he still held in his hand, and he was after the broken end of the line of the off leader. It was the most important one of the whole outfit, since it was the one to guide them away from the awful danger which still lay to the left hand.

By something better than chance it hung across the hame of the wheel horse, and as he caught it renewed hope sprung up.

The sounding of that horn showed that somewhere below there was a passing place. Which coach would reach it first?

If it was his, then, if skill and solid effort would work the trick, the wreck should be made right there, where he might at least have some show.

He could see that the other driver was aware of the danger, from which there could be but one way of escape, and was "tucking on the braid" to urge his horses into a run.

The boy was speaking soothingly to his horses, and all the time holding the reins ready for the crisis.

Suddenly, just a trifle ahead, he saw where faint marks of wheels left the trail and appeared to run into the wall of rock to the right.

This was the moment he had been waiting for, and, poor though his purchase was, he put all his power on the mouth of the off leader. Even though the line broke again, that pull would either answer his purpose, or further effort would be useless.

Luck was with him. The animals recognized the situation, or else obeyed his will, and darted into the cut-off, with which they were not altogether unacquainted.

The work of the road-makers here had been well done. The passage scooped out was a wide one, and the moment the wheels reached it they struck rising ground; then there was a lurch and a convulsion that sent every one within into one mingled mass, with Abiram Weintzheimer at the bottom.

The door flew open at the shock, and in a moment Myrtle had disengaged herself and was out on the ground; but the danger was over. The horses stood shivering, only too glad to stop now that they were relieved of the weight of the big stage.

The judge and Sport Mac were out an instant later, but they were hardly needed when each seized a team by the bridles.

By this time the other coach was opposite, and the driver, whose hair was beginning to settle down, and his hat rest more firmly on his head, launched a volley of expletives at the little group.

"Why in sanctified blazes didn't yer put on yer chain lock?" was the utterance he emitted, and as he never stopped to see what damage had been done he did not understand the incisive answer hurled back at him.

"Reckon he'll meet 'em, too; now, let's take stock of damages," and the boy looked keenly over the trembling steeds and examined the stage itself.

"All looks to be serene, and I wouldn't wonder if we made schedule time to Grizzly yet."

The sport shook his head, with a laugh. "Excuse me, but the walking is good enough for comfort, and not a bad thing for health. I'll take mine on foot. Grizzly's not more than a mile ahead."

"Does you dink dey'll refund on der fare ef we dakes it afoot back?" queried Abiram anxiously, as he emerged from the vehicle. "It vill pe a gase for tamages, put if der company von't allow for der valk I'll stay mit der goach."

"Good for you, uncle. You bet your

bottom dollar they ain't allowing for anything, not even for Keno's time, that I've been making up. Pile in, those that are going. I'll do the best I can for you, and if there's a spill after all, my neck will go first."

The young Ajax spoke with a confidence of tone more reassuring than his words. He had been fastening the broken line with a buckle, and now climbed to the driver's perch, where he carefully tested the brake.

"I won't desert you, little man!" smiled Miss Myrtle, as she sprung lightly back to her place, and with such an example even Mac gave up all idea of walking. In a minute more the coach was slipping softly down the hill.

Prompt to its schedule time, it rolled down the main street of Grizzly Gulch, and, it being well on in the afternoon, a number of citizens were out on the street and observed the strange driver on the box.

When the teams halted in front of the Continental a curious crowd greeted it. The absence of Keno Charley from the box meant that something out of the ordinary had happened.

Two men stood a little apart, at the end of the porch, watching the coming of the stage, and one of them gave a start as his eyes fell fairly on the amateur who had his hands on the "ribbons."

"That's him!" he whispered eagerly. "Mark him. Boss said he might slip through; an' he's did it!"

"Sure thar's no mistake?"

"Dead sure."

"Yer better be. Ther boss'd furnish a fust-class obiect fur a fust-class fun'ral ef we made ary mistake; an' he don't look like ther ginooine article."

"Looks ain't a countin' in this. Et's what ther boss sez. An' he sez, git ther kid. Cornsequently, I'm a gittin'."

"All right; but he's a blasted slimpsey lookin' article ter be makin' all this fuss about. Ef he war wearin' caliker, blest ef he an' the gal wouldn't be much ov a muchness, an' mighty hard ter tell apart."

"Ef he's a easy one I ain't objectin'; but ef yer looks at him squar you'll see he hez a mighty keen eye. Don't yer begin throwin' off er s'uthin' may begin ter drop."

"Drap nothin'! Kim along! I wonders what's happened ter Keno. We must find out, and then be goin'. Cain't do nothin' afore night."

As he drew up the lad tossed the lines to waiting hands, and was off his perch like a shot. Before Mike Motter, the proprietor of the Continental, could reach the door the young man was there and had it open.

"Here you are, safe in Grizzly. Allow me!"

This time he was the escort, Motter flanking the damsel on the other side, and the rest of the passengers bringing up the rear, never stopping to answer the questions which were ready for them on opportunity.

Mrs. Motter received the young lady at the door, whilst the rest followed the landlord to the office.

The lad appeared very much at home as he looked around and remarked:

"There might be worse roads than the one from Peddler's Pocket, but I reckon they're in the lower region. Never saw anything to beat it in this world."

"Come alone?" asked the proprietor

"Very much alone, not counting the other half-dozen. But there were a few minutes I wouldn't have objected to havin' a whole regiment in sight. But we pulled through, as I always do."

"Pulled through, eh? What war ther deefikilty?"

"Road-agents they call them out here. For a minute I did think I was elected to be robbed, but Keno drove through a howling; and there's nothing wrong with my hat, is there?"

He took off his stiff black hat, and thrusting his finger through a hole in the brim gave the chapeau a twirl.

"Bless my soul, but that war a close call. Did yer git skeered?"

"Scared nothing! I've been in worse places before. But Keno is a bird, and it will be profitable if you don't forget it."

"We're onto Keno down hyer, an' bird goes. Hyer's ther register."

Mike turned the old account-book around, and watched the youngster scratching in a sprawling hand:

"Johnny,

"New York City."

"Say! Johnny who? Johnny what?"

Mike looked doubtfully at his guest. He was about as curious as the next man. Besides, he was not keeping hotel for his health, and that sort of a register made him suspicious.

"Johnny on the Spot. Take a week out of that, and credit me with the change. There's no telling how soon I will go dead broke."

He tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece on the counter and then turned toward the water barrel and the tin wash basin, leaving to Sport McKenzie the task of explaining the absence of the missing Keno Charley.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM THE MAN."

As has been intimated, the lad who registered under the name of Johnny on the Spot was an entire stranger to the Grizzly Gulch district, this being his first visit to that region.

Sport Mac was not on the same list, for he had visited the town before, and had a general acquaintance with every grade of the Gulch citizens.

The remaining three gentlemen were old-timers, and were generally counted among the solid men of the town, though they enjoyed varying degrees of popularity. Anyhow, all of the passengers stopped at the Continental, for the present at least, though Weintzheimer as a rule boarded himself in the little cuddy hole to the rear of what he called his office.

Three out of the four had a little knot of anxious questioners, for though at first Johnny had thrown them a trifle off the trail, it did not take long for it to get noised abroad that something more had happened than an unsuccessful raid of the road-agents.

When Johnny had performed his ablutions he managed to vanish; but probably his ears burned in the distance, for Sport Mac, who held the larger part of the audience, had a good deal to say about him, and was not slow in telling it.

"Oh, yes, gents, he's nothing but a kid; but he's one of the kids you read about. Keno drive through? Of course he did. The lad held his gun to Keno's ear and told him to swing his whip—and he swung it."

"And got plugged for the doin' of it, eh? If you're shouting for a hero, what's the matter with Charley?" growled one of the bystanders.

"And it wasn't poor Charley's chio, either."

"Plugged? Get out! The teams got away with him after he had made the rifle on Zip, and he hadn't the sand to stay with 'em! On the down grade four

miles back he just dropped the ribbons and jumped the deck."

"On the down grade! Great guns and little grizzlies! What did you do next?"

"Oh, we just shook together right in a pile, except the lady, who stuck to the back seat. But that kid—that kid, mind you—climbed out of the window, mounted the box, grabbed the lines, and when they broke, as one of them did, he jumped for the teams. He just tooled us all safe into the turn-out at forty miles an hour in time for the up hearse to shave by. You ought to have heard Uncle Billy swear because we didn't have the chain-lock on."

"An' Keno with that bit of calico aboard! He ought ter be hung ef he ever shows up hyer. Who are she, by ther way? Boy an' her brother an' sister?"

"Just guess not. He stuck himself up on the box this morning before she dawned on him, and it looked like they never had met before. But he changed all that at Peddler's Pocket. How we did want to tear when he chucked himself right beside her, and the rest of us didn't have a show to get a word in edgewise! But that's all right now. If he hadn't been there we wouldn't be here."

Mac laughed at his recollections, but all the same he showed by the ring of his voice that the lad had made a solid friend in him.

"Who are they, anyhow? That's a mighty fine-lookin' heifer to be runnin' maverick. Ef ther boy ain't her friend, where is he?"

"Ask the lady the question yourself. If she wants you to know, she'll no doubt answer. I'll never tell."

The sport stared coldly at his questioner, who knew it was better not to push the subject further just then.

Some one else, however, wanted to know how it came Weintzheimer was done up in such fine shape, and that restored Mac to good humor, while his little story sent the crowd into a roar of laughter. As Abiram was not a popular man, the history of his tribulations called up no sympathy at all.

After that it was time to go to supper, and curiosity could receive no further satisfaction, though there was a lively interest to know what the strangers wanted within their gates.

The Continental was doing a thriving business, and that evening the supper table was fuller than ever. Not a boarder who could find a place and a plate was absent; and for the guests who arrived on the stage places were reserved, except in the case of Weintzheimer, who was too badly shaken up to come to the table, even if he had been willing to stand the tariff.

Of course, Miss Milly was the principal attraction; but there was a strong desire to see the boy, the reputation of whose freshness and nerve had gone abroad, coupled with the information that he was dressed like a dude, and flashed gold coin like a prince.

Even Mrs. Johnson dropped promptly on her seat after the ringing of the bell which announced that the dining-room was open.

Miss Mabilee did not disappoint the other guests, and Johnny was on the spot. They came in together, though they had just met in the hall, and took seats in an unconscious manner, while every eye was turned in their direction.

Both of them were blessed with healthy appetites, and attended so strictly to business that they had little to do with conversation, yet Miss Myrtle found time to say to him:

"I begin to think you can be trusted

better than an older hand, and some one I must trust. Can you manage to meet me by and by without raising a suspicion that it is for any purpose but mutual admiration?"

"If I can't, I'll want to go home. Don't let these gents get too close with their devotion, and you'll find me on the spot whenever you fix the hour."

"In an hour, then. Meantime, see if you can find out anything about one Carlos Murillo, a rancher, I believe, who lives somewhere near here, on the Mexican trail. Excite as little remark as you can. I need not tell you I am not here simply to air my beauty."

"Nor I for fun; but I am at your service, all the same."

A few minutes later they retired from the table together, though separating at the door.

"Great Scott, who is she?" muttered the lad to himself.

"I have traveled four thousand miles and laid out for a month's work to discover what she expects me to find out in an hour after supper. And wants me to keep quiet about it, too! Blame it, if any feminines of the family were missing I'd say she must be my long-lost sister. But up to date I haven't heard of any of them getting away. In fact, when you see me you see about all there is of all of us. Wonder what style Senor Carlos is? Sport Mac might know."

The coincidence of which he spoke in his thoughts was puzzling; but Johnny did not allow it to engross his attention to the exclusion of the business in hand. He watched for McKenzie to come out, and took the chance for a private word.

"Say, Sport Mac, from some things dropped I reckon you know something of the ropes around here. Will you give a poor young orphan a pointer?"

"Right I will, and throw myself in along with it. You understand, I am a shark by profession, and not exactly the right kind for a lad to tie to, on the average; but, if you'll let me do it in a quiet way, there is no young man ever came into Grizzly with better backing—and it's a place where he may need it."

"I've jotted that all down. Wolf don't eat wolf, and maybe I'm a little in your line myself. I don't want to run in the way of any game of yours, but can you tell me if there is a rancher about here, pretty well heeled, who goes by the name of Senor Carlos Murillo?"

The sport gave a low, soft whistle and looked sharply at his interrogator.

"Say, lad, you're not a secret service man, are you? They take in some blame queer-looking timber, and from what I've seen you are better than the best of it."

"Honor bright, between boy and man, no. I'm on a racket to put coin or something else in my own pocket. Now, what was the meaning of the question?"

"Try and forget it. I do know something about the gentleman, though he is no intimate of mine. I meant to warn you that he is a dangerous individual for persons of that stripe to fool around. Why, I can't say, but the reason for it might be found."

"Thanks. That throws a whole barrel of X rays on his character, if not on his occupation. Can you give me an idea of how he is fixed, and if there is much wealth in sight?"

"Fixed like a lord, and, they say, lives like a king, but not over-fond of visitors except those who come from the other side of the line. Let me warn you: When you sit down to play with him have your gun in your lap, and afterward don't take a late stroll with him on a dark night. That's the way I sized the man

up; and I make my living by doing such things."

"Thanks. How far is it out to his ranch?"

"It may be ten miles, it may be twenty. I never met anybody who had been there, but it's not hard to find. If you're wise, you'll keep away. There'll be a chance to meet him in town, and that will give you the advantage of a square deck and a table he don't own."

"Thanks again. I think I'll go around and ask when there will be a show to expect him."

"All right; and, if you don't object, I'll go along with you. The Gem is the place we want to strike. They have tried to steer me up against him there, but, honest Injun, I've fought shy of him, so you judge."

More than one glance was cast in the direction of the two as they strolled down the street together, and when the faces turned away there may have been a smile of pity on some of them. At the Gem the welcome was cordial.

"Anything big at short cards in sight?" sport asked, after a little.

"Nothing, unless you care to tackle Murillo. He's around to-night."

"If I can't do better, perhaps I wouldn't care, but Senor Carlos is not exactly the kind to pick up without an introduction; and they say he's a mighty unpleasant man sometimes after the fun is over."

The answer to that remained unsaid, for at that moment a dark-visaged man, with midnight eyes, swarthy face, and flowing black hair, stepped out from a stall.

"Who is it that takes the name of Carlos Murillo in vain? He is here, and I am the man."

CHAPTER V.

"BEWARE OF THE NEXT TIME."

There was a direct challenge in his tones as Murillo announced himself, yet it was possible to pass over the offense for the sake of some strong motive. If Sport McKenzie had been looking for trouble, there would, however, have been loads of it right then and there.

He smiled as he glanced at the foreign-looking gentleman, and it was a pleasant, reassuring smile.

"Vanity and the name of Murillo don't go together, so far as I have heard, and our mutual friend behind the bar is not to blame if it was mentioned at all. I have just landed, and was quizzing Tommy about the chances for interviewing some of the mighty chiefs when the night grew a little older."

"And I think you said something about what might happen after the meeting was over."

Sport Mac was not very long suffering, and his eyes flashed at this persistence.

"Oh, to some such interviews there is no hereafter. If you're in a hurry about it, we may as well have it out now. I suppose you are heeled."

The sport made no movement toward his weapons, but there was plenty of time for that. There was no one much quicker on the draw, and he was willing to risk the chances with the senor.

Nevertheless, it came to him without a reason why that this Mexican-looking man might not be after him at all. He intercepted one glance at Johnny that had in it the gleam of a rapier—a glance of passion and of hate.

"Not now," said the senor coldly, after first recovering his temper by an apparent effort.

"It might seem as if the fault was mine if I shot you down in cold blood, and yet the quarrel has not been of my

seeking. Beware of the next time we meet. And as for that cub at thy side—he is in good hands to be trained well. If he comes not to his end by the rope it will be that he has first felt the bite of lead. To dream that I would sit down in such company! It makes me warm."

Without ever a seeming thought of danger or interruption from the man he had insulted, Murillo wheeled abruptly and strode away, leaving the room without another word to any one.

"Well, I swear," said Sport Mac, biting thoughtfully at his cigar as he looked after the retreating figure.

"Looks like he had made an appointment to shoot on sight. What the thunder is it all about, anyhow?"

Johnny broke into a laugh.

"Bless your soul, it looks more like he was an old friend that you had done a favor for once upon a time. Say, is he Mexican, sure enough, or does he just put on that sort of style?"

"I'll never tell. He has all the looks, but the voice for the most part belongs on this side of the line. I knew what I was about when I wanted to steer clear of the unmannerly galoot. He and I won't mix."

"That you did, Mac. He's bad medicine, as you call it out here. You want to leave him to me to handle. Let's go out and hunt him up. I want another look, so I won't forget him."

Tommy was as much surprised as any one at the course things had taken, but he threw in a word of warning.

"Something must have gone cross-ways, for he's sour as a bear with a sore head. Look a little out when you get near him. There's some of his gang in town, and after that kind of a snarl you can look for him to double-team you if he gets the chance. As you don't know his men, they'd have a mighty good chance to get in their work."

"Thanks, awful; but I suppose if trouble does come, the only thing to do is to go for all in sight. Ta, ta! We'll be back again when things get to moving."

Johnny waved a farewell, and the two went out together, Sport Mac muttering as they went:

"That's what I get for going on the war-path before the lamps are lit. I might have known better."

"Oh, rubber! Haven't I just got a taste of what sort they keep at Grizzly Gulch. If we had waited for pure business hours I might have got the lesson in the neck. I'll go back to the Continental, get my heavy harness on, and be ready for actual hostilities. One thing sure, I've got Murillo down fine, and won't be apt to forget him."

"You go, then, and I'll see you later. There's something back of this, and I'll try to find out what it is."

That suited Johnny exactly. It was about time for him to keep his engagement with Miss Myrtle, and he had at least something interesting to tell her.

CHAPTER VI.

CHIEFLY CONFIDENTIAL.

"You dear, delightful boy, I am so glad to see you!" was Miss Mabilee's greeting as they met.

"I was really getting lonesome, and thinking of sending for that interesting gentleman with the hook nose and money to lend."

"Great Scott! If you are in trouble, make me your banker."

"Oh, no; I never thought of that at all. But any company seemed better than none. Now, tell me all about it."

"About what?"

"Why, your adventures. I fancy you

are one of those people who delight in such things, and have no trouble to find them. First, you might let me know what you are doing here. I don't think you are a resident of this section of the globe."

"I should hope not; but, confidence for confidence. Will you give me a little outline of your own affairs in return. I have the same sort of suspicions."

"That's what I'm here for."

"Drive on, then."

In many respects the two were well matched, and being thrown together would be likely to fraternize. Johnny did not hesitate.

"Being a young man of means, and having about exhausted the possibilities of everything above the lower crust of New York life, I determined to expand my mind by travel. I stopped for a while in Denver, and accumulated considerable knowledge there and in its neighborhood. About the time it grew tame I caught a glimpse of your own entrancing face."

"A rest, please. You don't expect me to believe such bosh?"

"Truth; every word truth. Without a moment's warning I swung myself on the rear sleeper; kept track of you without an effort; was a loiterer at several camps where you lingered, having various incidental adventures, and finally drifted to this land of delight, of which I had never heard three days ago. I am your devoted slave, and to prove it I will say that I have already interviewed Senor Carlos Murillo, and that he has threatened to shoot my head off at our next meeting. Do you think he will keep his word?"

All this story he reeled off with a light and airy manner, but in a way hard to tell from the truth—if there was any difference.

He puzzled Miss Mabilee, who looked at him doubtfully, until the mention of Murillo's name, when she was all earnest attention.

"Ah, if that is the truth I can pardon your impertinence. You have done well. What is he like? Describe him to me."

In a few words Johnny gave a history of that interview.

"Now then," he added, "it strikes me this is getting to be something like the handle of a jug—all on one side. Reverse the position of the amphora. Divulge. What is there in the wind, and how can I be of use to you?"

"Mr. Johnny, if that is the best name you will give me, you can be of just that use which a true friend can be to an honest woman, who is alone and may be going into great danger. To be frank, it may be unwise for you to attempt to back my game, and I do not ask it. Should I accept your own offer, it is likely you will meet with adventures enough to satisfy even such a glutton as yourself. My visit here is to deal with that man as he has dealt with me, or mine."

There was no trace of mirth in her countenance now. Her face took on a hard, cold look, and her slender hand doubled tightly, as though it might be touching a dagger.

"All right; that is on the spot. What has he done?"

"Perhaps murdered my sister. If not, why has he hid her away from me for all these years? Why can I not learn if she be dead or living? Why no answer to the letters I have written? Why has he hidden himself so that it was only by chance I found the trail?"

"Prize conundrums, every one of them. The only way to get the answer is to look in the book."

"There is, there must be, some brutal crime back of it all, else why should he remain silent; why evidently have designs upon you simply since you seem my friend and attendant? Better for you, perhaps, if I were to tell him the truth, that you are an utter stranger, met by chance. He will not hesitate to take your life if he is not undeceived."

"And what will I be doing?" answered the lad, with cool insouciance, folding his arms and looking at her with a cold assumption of disdain.

"And if he puts up sufficient frills, what do you suppose Sport Mac will be doing after he has run the battery of my guns?"

"Wait, wait! For heaven's sake, do not kill him among you until I have found out the fate of poor Cleo. Keep him sacred as the apple of your eye until then. He is the only link; and I am not sure he is not a broken one."

"What, then, do you propose to do?"

"To interview him."

"Where? Around at The Gem?"

"No. I shall seek him in his lair, if possible. All Grizzly shall know whither I am going; and if I do not come back you shall lead the search for me. Here I will avoid him if I can."

"That last is no bad scheme; but as for the rest—when you go to the Murillo ranch your humble servant goes along. Or, if anybody is to go into the lion's den alone, I must be the Daniel. I needn't tell you there is to be some danger about it."

"Not alone; but perhaps we may go together. You would be a better escort than an older man. Remember, though. If this meeting of yours with him is likely to lead to something serious, it must not be until after I have had my say with Murillo. I could kill the man who comes between to ruin my last hope to find out Cleo's fate."

"I'll make myself safe, then; but, great guns, I'll have to be hustling around to save Sport McKenzie's life. By this time he may have the ranchero climbing the golden stairs. They say Sport is awful on the shoot."

The conference ended almost abruptly, and a few minutes later the lad left the Continental by the back door. There was wisdom in Johnny and his methods, for two brawny ruffians were watching the front from the shadows on the opposite side of the street. Just at that moment one of them was saying:

"Et ain't jest the sweetest job in ther land, an' ef we cain't ketch him alone et's goin' ter go slow an' easy. Ef he's bunked in fur ther night ther fat's in ther fire."

"No danger ov that. He will come again. But we want to reach him afore he gits in with the sport. He carries a heap big gun, and ain't slow to use it."

For half an hour longer they watched, and when almost hopeless saw a figure steal out they thought they recognized.

Height, walk, and clothing corresponded to those of the young dude they had seen descend from the stage on its arrival from Peddler's Pocket. Without a word they dropped in on the trail and followed, keeping well within the shadows.

CHAPTER VII.

HOW SIX-FOOT SOL PULLED TEETH.

Grizzly was a brisk mining town, which was enjoying something of a boom, and it had length and thickness without much breadth.

It took some time to promenade the main street, but when you had got through that was about all there was of

it. By this time the evening was fairly well advanced, and the saloons, of which there were plenty galore, had got down to business.

The pace at the Gulch was a good one, but there was a question whether it was not too strong to last, unless the mining ventures panned out more brilliantly than they had done.

That was not worrying the lonely pedestrian, however, who seemed to be strolling along without any particular object except to see something of the town.

Here and there he slackened his gait a little to peer into some saloon through open door or window. Now and then he moved aside so as not to come into direct contact with a rough-looking man or men, but without any evidence of timidity.

And all the time, skulking in the rear, came the two shadows, slinking out of sight from the glare of the saloon lights, and falling further behind; but closing up at the darker portions of the journey.

"Whar is he goin'?" asked one of the men, suspiciously. He was not satisfied this tramp was altogether aimless.

"Can't prove et by me, 'less et's a trap ov some kind ter find ef thar's ary body playin' tag. Et may be blamed on healthy ef et works. Thar won't be ary thing left ter do but git down ter hard business."

"What we waitin' fur, then? Thar can't be a better chance than now ef we close up."

"Right you be. Put on a leetle steam. I wish I war sure they didn't nobody see us back yander; but we got ter run ther chances."

Their quarry had got beyond the last saloon, and the shanties were growing more scattered. Here and there a light gleamed out from some lonely building, but it was just the place for a desperate deed, an' the hour might serve as well as a later one.

The two moved more swiftly and silently than ever, and at the same time the lonely wanderer halted and peered through the darkness like one searching for a landmark.

One hand was extended, making motions as though checking off the different buildings which could be discerned.

And while thus engaged the two human tigers made their spring.

There was not even an exclamation of surprise, or the sound of a struggle, so neatly and completely was the work done.

One man caught the victim so that not a movement was possible, whilst the other shut off with a broad palm the possibility of an outcry.

"Git out yer strings, Cale, an' slip in yer gag. I kin hold him while yer fits ther muzzle. This job war jest too easy."

"Don't gush, Ugly, et ain't all did yit. An' you, youn'ker! Ef yer dar's ter make a sound we'll twist yer neck an' crack yer bones. This ain't no racket fur l'uv an' fun. Stiddy, now."

The youngster was steady as a coach horse.

As yet there was no chance for anything else, and nothing could be more useless than a hopeless struggle.

With a skill and swiftness that seemed to show that sort of thing was not altogether new to him, Cale Burton applied the gag and then knotted the wrists of the captive together with a strong cord.

"Now, then, jest allow me ter guide yer weary footsteps a weenty bit further in ther way you should go. Step out—an' ef yer don't step we'll kerry yer, so turnin' balky won't do you no good."

As Cale spoke he caught the prisoner by the elbow, and without the least hesitation he began to move forward.

"Good nerves," chuckled Ugly Dave; "he never give a shiver. I knowed he war a lad ov sand. We'll let him down easy ez we kin."

"Oh, button!" interrupted his partner

"These hyer shanties hev ears sometimes, nigh most ez long ez yourn. Wait tell we git out ov ther woods, an' then you kin holler loud ez yer wants."

In fact, the luck which had attended them this far seemed too good to last, and after that warning they advanced with a silent caution which soon took them out of the range of the town by a route which led directly to the hills immediately in front of which the town was built.

Nothing further was said to indicate to the prisoner what were their intentions, and gagged as he was he could ask no questions. He did not move with very cheerful alacrity, and if the truth is to be told there was a certain lagging of footsteps by which progress was impeded.

At the distance of perhaps half a mile they turned into a defile, through which the beams of the newly risen moon were sifting.

"Now, kid," began Ugly Dave, "I needn't tell yer this yer are bed-rock bizzness, which ain't ter be chuckled at. What ther boss means we ain't hyer ter say, but to ther boss yer goes. Frum ther trouble he's tuk in ther matter, I'd be edvisin' yer ter be sayin' yer prayers ez yer goes along. Mebbe he'll turn yer loos, mebbe he'll do ther other thing, but ef you acts white we'll do ther squar' thing tell we turns yer over. Ef not, we hev orders ter break yer neck sooner than see yer git away."

"An' we'll do et, too," chipped in Cale Burton, who was not quite so soft-hearted.

"An' I guess jest not. Han's up, an' I'd o'rter pull trigger ter wunst!"

Right at their backs sounded the order, and it was emphasized by a brace of clicks, and the cold touch of a pistol barrel which each man felt under an ear.

The order was given in a rich, rolling tone, yet there was a ring about it which showed the owner meant to be obeyed.

Taken in such an act, the two knew that justice and the law would not ask a cent for their death. The hands of Cale Burton flew up as if moved by springs.

But at the same time the two stepped a little further apart, and though the nearest arm of Ugly Dave went up, the other hand dropped to his pocket, and he half-wheeled, whilst the late prisoner heard the hammer of the derringer in that pocket go back.

The action had thrown Dave's head out of range, and he had half a second to go on.

Good use would he have made of that half second, too, had it not been for the kid, who was not as helpless as his captors had supposed.

Suddenly he lowered his head and propelled himself forward like a bolt from a catapult, catching Ugly Dave fairly amidships.

There was a grunt as every atom of breath was forced out of the body of the ugly man, and he went crashing backward, the youth following in his fall, but immediately rolling out of harm's way.

"Say, you, thar! Take hole on yer frien's wrists, an' be jest so spry erbout et, er off goes ther hull roof ov yer up-

per story. Fu'st an' only time ov askin'. Now!"

It was coldly said, but as though every word of it was meant, and Cale did not hesitate with that muzzle threatening him. He sprung in on the other at once and seized his wrists.

That might impede his movements, to be sure, but it would give a chance to whisper a word or two which might bring a plan to the surface for their advantage.

But it also brought them both where the assailant could once more cover them, and it also gave him a few seconds, which he employed to the best advantage.

He transferred both pistols to one hand, and with the other drew a knife and swiftly and certainly cut the cords from the wrists of the prisoner. Just one slice, and the work was done.

Then the knife disappeared, and once more he held the drop.

"Now, bub, I reckon yer wants ter help yer uncle, Six-Foot Solomon, what's gittin' yer outen this hyer scrape; so you jest 'bey orders. I'll see they don't play ary jimnastikle p'ufformances. Dr'or ther teeth; an' you fellers stay right thar tell ther perfessor are done with ther extractin'."

CHAPTER VIII. A SECOND SWOOP.

The first move of the youngster was to tear away the gag. The next was to step boldly forward, with a revolver in one hand, whilst with the other a search was made. In the short space of a few seconds the two were thoroughly disarmed and their weapons cast aside.

"Glad ter see yer a lad ov sense. That's goin' ter save a heap-sight of shootin' an' bad blood!"

This to the lad. Then to the two:

"Now, you, Cale Burton, an' you, Ugly Dave, yer Uncle Solomon knows yer right down ter bed-rock, an' when he sez 'Git!' yer wants ter scatter. H'iste up them digits ov yourn an' show us ther broad ov yer backs. They be a heap-sight better lookin' than yer befront-isses. Git a move on, an' keep a movin'! I'll give yer w'ile I counts ten, an' then I'll begin ter shoot ef yer in shootin' distans'. An' yer knows I ain't a liar."

"Cuss ye, Six-Foot Sol—!" began Ugly Dave.

"One!" counted the man who had been called Sol; and the two waited to hear no more.

Each put his best pace to the front.

"Three! four!" continued Six-Foot Sol, and watched their retreating steps, his battered face on the grin.

Before long they had disappeared at a turn in the defile. Then Solomon sprung from the rock on which he had been coolly seated.

"Git a move on, er we may hev ter interv'oo ther boss hisself. I bin mighty much afeared he'd turn up afore we got rid ov 'em. This hyer way! I knows ther ropes an' wrinkles, an' kin steer yer through."

The Six-Footer led at a rapid rate, and before long they were in the trail which pointed to the gulch.

"I seen 'em a-marchin' yer off, an' I thought I'd hole on tell I knowed more what ther game war. You kerried yer-self with lots ov grit fur a youngster, an' mebbe ett's ez well yer didn't find me at h'um when yer called."

"Have done with your nonsense! Have you discovered anything, or was the hope you gave me when me met at Mesquite all a lie, to win a little coin out of my pocket?"

"Fur ther time I've hed I've learned a heap, but ett warn't jest on your line. Tell I kin say more I ain't askin' fur a cent, an' I ain't tellin' a word more tell I kin, 'ceptin' thet I b'leve yer sister are a livin'. Now, fur reason ez I needn't explain, you want ter mog on in ter town alone. An' ef yer'll take a fool's advice yer'll git onder kiver soon ez yer hev arove. Mebbe I'm wrong, but I don't b'lieve Grizzly Gulch are healthy fur a lad ov your size."

"Your reason for thinking so. Tell me all. I must know, and at once."

The voice was no longer that of a lad, but of Myrtle Mabilee, who at that minute thought only of the intelligence she had received, and nothing of the advice with which it was coupled.

"Sorry, mum, but at this hyer moment I cain't jest tell, but I'll see yer later. So long!"

He turned as if to go back on the trail, but instantly Myrtle's revolver flashed out.

"Stay! Another step, and I shoot. I have you lined. I have paid you well—better than I should, and you shall not trifle with me."

"Shell are a big word, mum, an' not ther kind ter use with yer Uncle Solomon. Ding-blast ett, shoot! What hez he got ter live fur? An' what yer makin' by ett, aryhaw? A pore ole tramp goes outen ther wet, an' what hev yer gained by ett? Le'mme be, an' I'll do yer good. Crowd me, an' yer won't hev a mite ov fun furever a'rtewards."

As he spoke Six-Foot Sol made a low bow, as though introducing himself, and then his extended hands appeared to say:

"Here I am. Look at me and see if it is not the truth I have told you?"

Myrtle allowed her eyes to run over the ragged, rotund figure, as revealed in the moonlight, and, in spite of her late passion, burst into a laugh.

Judging by his appearance, there was as much truth as poetry in what the man said.

At least, he had served her well, and, indefinitely as he had conveyed it, had given her a hope that Cleo still lived.

"Have your own way; yet a word from you might save me from some false trail of my own finding. If I lose my life it will be coin out of your pocket. The next time you may not be there to rescue."

"Oh, Johnny'll be 'round. Me er Johnny, ett don't make a differbitterns wich."

"Johnny! Who is Johnny? What does he want here? Why has he interested himself in my affairs? Is he friend or foe?"

"I'll never tell ef you don't; but treat him right an' yer'll find him white. He's a leetle boy ter tie to, an' you orter know. I reckon you've got his britcheloons on. Ef I hedn't found yer in sich a pickle, I swear I wouldn't a knowed ye apart. But Johnny didn't git thar in that way."

Chuckling to himself, the queer character turned and moved off, and Miss Mabilee did not try to stop him.

Not to be again taken unawares, she walked rapidly toward the heart of the town, the outskirts of which already had been reached.

The interview for the sake of which she had ventured out was over, and to get to the hotel as secretly and swiftly as possible was now her object.

To gain the Continental, the Gem had to be passed, and, naturally enough, Miss Myrtle took the other side of the street. If Johnny happened to be in that neighborhood, her resemblance would only serve to attract attention to the fact that she was not what she seemed.

The lonesomeness and the semi-darkness on that side were entirely to her liking, and the one spot she objected to was where a band of light from the open door of the Gem lay across the road and cast a streak on the side of the building opposite. Right there she stood the most chance of attracting attention.

She looked sharply up as she approached.

The building was a low, one-story affair, with the front carried up to a square to give it a semblance of greater height, and on the top of it she descried the figure of a man, who was looking over the parapet at the end of the roof.

He held his arm poised, but the light was not plain enough for her to distinguish his exact intention. Not very likely that it had any reference to herself. She walked on, but her eyes were wider open than ever, and her hand was on the butt of the revolver which her careless captors of a little time back had left her.

She was more interested in what was in the street than in the man above. Surely he must be watching some one below, and that would be the party for her to fear.

As she came nearer to the house a low, sharp whistle sounded from the farther corner of the building, and then from above a noosed rope came hurtling down.

It dropped exactly around her arms, and as it tightened at a skillful jerk it effectually pinioned her hands at her sides.

A second time that evening had she been caught napping!

It seemed as though the object had been to prevent a use of weapons rather than to shut off the chance of an alarm. Had she so chosen, there was plenty of time to give a scream that would have aroused the people across the way.

Instead, Myrtle struggled, hopelessly, but in silence.

Again a whistle, though this time in a different note. There was an answer, and at once she was seized by several hands.

"Didn't I tell yer so?" asked one, in a low tone.

"He ain't ther kind ter squeal, ef he lost a four-story buildin'. Handle him easy! He won't kick ef he ain't got a chance, an' he's too sandy a young chick ter draggle his feathers. Thar!"

The last exclamation was caused by the sudden appearance of several horsemen who shot out from around the corner of the building and darted straight for the spot.

"Here! To me!" exclaimed the foremost, and the voice was the voice of Carlos Murillo.

"Take him an' be happy!" answered one of Myrtle's captors, swinging her lightly from the ground into the outstretched arms of Murillo, whose horse never even faltered in its stride.

He caught the burden with the careless ease of one who had practiced in such things, and with a rush and clatter the little body of men swept away down the street.

As for Murillo, his face drooped close to that of the pinioned girl as he hissed into her ear:

"At last! Vengeance comes my way, and you must die!"

CHAPTER IX.

OPENING A CAMPAIGN.

After the words which had passed between the sport and the ranchero it was more than likely there would be a meeting of the two later on which would not end so harmlessly.

So it seemed to Tommy and some of

the habitués of the Gem when they talked the matter over after the parties had left.

"It'll be dead loads of fun, and mighty worth the seeing of it," averred Tommy; "I'd hate to miss it awful much, and I don't intend to if I can help; but, all the same, I hope it won't come off in the Gem."

"That's what they are looking for, allee samee," answered his nearest friend, glancing at some men in broad-brimmed sombreros, whose belts bristled with weapons, and whose faces were dark and scowling. They had just entered, but it did not seem for the purposes of libation.

"There's the gang from the ranch, and they didn't all drop in here for nothing. When the trouble begins they must expect to take a hand!"

"More like they mean to wreck the shebang. Look a little out. If they begin that game there will be something going on at this end of the line. Ah! There he comes now!"

It was Senor Murillo who entered, and as he came he cast a keen glance around the room, as if in search of some one not exactly a friend.

If it was either Sport Mac or Johnny on the Spot he was after, he was doomed to disappointment. Neither of them could be seen.

Without hesitation he pushed over to one of the cowboys and said something in a low tone.

The answer was a negative shake of the head, and again he started around the room.

Tommy, watching his maneuvers, took it all in.

"Looks disappointed like. As a general thing, Sport Mac ain't so hard to find when a man is looking for him. Kind of puzzles me, too."

"I thought he'd been around by this time, myself. One thing's sure. He ain't hiding, and he ain't lost his sand. Guess he's gone to put that kid to bed, an's waiting till he gits asleep."

"Don't you worry about that kid! From the sand he showed on the trail he can just take care of himself every evening in the year, and don't need the sport for a guardian. Eh! Looks as though they were going to quit, after all."

Murillo had gone out almost at once, and now his men were following him. Whatever were their intentions, they did not seem to think it worth while to linger longer here.

"They ain't the quitting kind, but it does look as though they might be willing to leave. Luck go with 'em. The fun will come later on, all the same. Those two ain't done with each other yet."

However that might be, the affair appeared to be postponed. Several arrivals from other saloons had seen nothing of the sport, and, though one or two of Murillo's men had dropped in at them long enough to take a drink and a look around, they had not remained.

They had not left the town—at least the cowboys had not. Some of the horses were hitched where they had been from their first appearance, whilst it was well enough known that unless there was some reason for it they would hardly have got away without attracting attention.

Of course, there were only a few who gave a thought to the matter.

Nearly every one knew who Sport Mac was, but until business actually opened out his going and coming were things hardly to be noticed by the mass of the camp.

Tommy had his own affairs. Running the bar of the Gem after the evening exercises fairly opened was about enough

for one man, and what he learned from a question here and there was not of enough importance to cause him to neglect his own interests. It was impossible to keep the run of what was going on outside.

This was the way it happened that no attention was given to the little knot of horsemen gathered not far away, and that when the abduction came no one at the Gem was on the look-out for what happened. The first intimation of the affair was hearing a loud shout from the street, the rattle of horses' feet, and a single shot.

All that excited nobody. When the men from the Murillo ranch were in town such a departure as that was tame, and only accounted for by the early hour of the evening. Before now they had put a dozen bullet-holes in the front of the Gem, by way of farewell; and had not meant any harm by it, either.

There were just two persons on the street who seemed to take note of what had been done; and one of them had fired the shot heard by some of the frequenters of the saloon.

"On the spot, by glory; but, somehow, the spot don't seem to be there!" exclaimed one of the two to his companion, who was no other than Sport McKenzie.

"What is it all about, anyhow? I just took a hand in on account of general principles. Looks like Murillo and his gang."

"Can't go much on looks, or I would swear that party they were snatching up was a boy who goes by the name of Johnny. If I hadn't been sure it wasn't, I'd have shot myself, and Carlos would have been apt to hear something fall."

"Oh, he'll be apt to do that anyhow, if he listens long enough. I haven't had so much experience flipping at my fellow-men, but my work in the galleries used to be called very fine, and I'll wager sequins that rear fellow has a hole in the fleshy part of his right shoulder that will make him weak about a lift for the next two weeks. What are we going to do about it?"

"Sure you haven't got a brother?"

"Dead sure, but—!"

Johnny slapped his thigh with his palm in sudden enlightenment.

"I had another suit of clothes, and it's dollars to dimes that youngster is inside of them."

"What! Then it may have been you they were after?"

"You bet. They fired at the crow and hit the pigeon. It beats the Dutch. You know the little chap?"

"Can't say that I do. He's a lad of pluck, anyhow."

"Lad your grandmother! It's Miss Myrtle Mabile; that's who it is. What are we going to do about it?"

"If you are right, turn out the gang. Grizzly won't back the outrage."

"Not so certain; and there would be more or less of the population defunct before it was all over. Looks to me as though it was a time for strategy, my boy. We'll let him know we are on the track, and he will hardly harm her. If he means that, we couldn't save her with an army; and when we fail it will be time enough to try worse men."

"Something in all that. But the first thing to do is to find out if you are right in your suspicion—provided the young lady didn't make a dicker with you beforehand. If the clothes are missing, Miss Mabilee is in them, sure enough."

At the rate the ranchero and his men swept out of town it was useless to think of following on foot; and a few minutes more or less would not count for much if

instant pursuit was not to be made. To make things certain they adjourned to the Continental, Sport Mac waiting outside while his boy pard made an investigation.

Johnny came out in a minute or two.

"Her cheek beats that of a lightning-rod man. Left a note of apology in case I turned up before she got back; and the goods are gone, sure enough. Do you suppose there are a couple of horses to be had in this burg for love or money?"

"I suppose not—at this time of night. We ought to have foraged on the enemy while we had the chance. There were a dozen mustangs tied around all evening, but I don't see any now. Guess it will have to be in light marching order and go as you can. I'm not so sure we ought to go at all."

"That's so, Mac. You better stay in reserve, to bring up the forces if anything happens to me. Looks as though this was going to be one of the things one man can handle better than a dozen, and I'm that one man. I'm not sure they won't turn her loose if they find out who they've got."

"Perhaps they will, but we won't take the chances. If you are going, count me in on the same train; and we may as well start."

"Yes; when we fill the commissary. This is going to be something of a campaign."

How much of a one it was going to be neither of them was then aware.

CHAPTER X. AN AWFUL CLUTCH.

The second attack of the evening was, if anything, a greater surprise than the first; but Miss Myrtle stood it with the same courage she had before manifested.

Being as shrewd as the average woman, she had little difficulty in putting two and two together and giving a close guess into whose hands she had fallen.

She came to about the same conclusion as Johnny in regard to the mistake which had been made, and that fact gave her more courage, if any was needed.

If she could conceal her identity and at the same time convince the leader in the affair that she was not the fresh young man from the East who was bound to take a hand at all that was in sight, she might find more of profit than harm in this adventure.

So she thought to herself, and the words hissed in her ear only served to confirm her in this belief.

By the time they had got fairly beyond the outskirts of Grizzly she was in as composed a frame of mind as it was possible for her to be under the circumstances, and was keeping not only her eyes but her ears open, to take in anything like information. She had not a doubt she was going straight to the ranch of Carlos Marillo.

Miss Mabilee was an accomplished horsewoman; but that was not much in her favor, save for the confidence it gave her.

The position she was in was not by any means comfortable, and if she had not wanted to learn all that was possible before an explanation came she might have forced it then and there.

After that one outburst not a word was said to her. Several of the cowboys rode in advance, and several in the immediate rear, whilst the rest trailed on behind. She could now and then hear them conversing in a low tone, but made nothing out of what they said.

As time went by all this had no effect, and she would have welcomed a word from the silent chief, even if it was but

to renew his threat. That would open up the subject of identity; for by this time she began to feel she would sooner make her first visit to the ranch in some other way.

But she had opened the campaign with cold silence, and her pride urged her not to give in. Her teeth were set hard, and still she rode on, more and more uncertain what the end would be.

At first there seemed to be some fear of pursuit.

Those in the rear halted now and then for a short time, listening or waiting for whoever might be in the rear.

When that danger seemed altogether over, the interval was not quite so great, and the pace was comparatively easy for all hands.

She wished now that she had obtained more particulars about the location of this ranch toward which they were supposed to be going.

It began to look at last as though there might be some mistake about that.

In such a case she could well imagine her position was a profitless one as well as dangerous, and the few words finally overheard did not tend to give her courage.

All this while she had been simply biding her time, and throwing Murillo off his guard. He did not dream of resistance, and looked for no effort of escape, for the present at least.

So it happened that when they rode down to a ford in the river to the banks of which they had come she was on the alert, whilst the rest were not.

When she saw the water coming up higher and higher along the horse's flanks her resolution was suddenly made, and with a quick motion she writhed out of her captor's arms.

Had she known it, the river was up. Nothing, in reality, that was very dangerous so long as they kept to the ford, but even there the water was lapping against the saddle-girths when she took her flight, and below or above the line from shore to shore there was deeper water, and other danger.

It was on the deeper water that Myrtle counted.

Unless she was badly mistaken, this was not the way to the Murillo ranch, and it was time for her to look after safety before they had gone too far from the line on which she had hoped to travel. No one outside of a South Sea queen was ever more thoroughly at home in the water than Miss Mabilee, and the dive was taken without the least fear.

She took her directions a moment before, and, diving well under, swum stoutly on a quartering course toward the shore so lately left.

There was danger in it, but the only thing she cared for was the drift which from time to time floated down and threatened to strike a swimmer in spite of more than average skill to avoid it.

It was just such a piece of wreckage from the banks above which aided her. It suddenly bobbed up into view twenty feet below, and in the direction of the further bank, twirling along in the indistinct light for all the world like one floating on the surface.

It had already reached the deeper water beyond the line of the ford.

Carlos pointed with a shout, and his men understood what had happened, and were fooled as badly as he. A rush was made in that direction.

By the time they discovered the error, Myrtle had almost reached the bank lately left, and was swimming with head and body low down in the water, and with an ear for all that could be heard.

"Back!" thundered Carlos.

"I was fooled. He has gone toward the other shore. The current would carry him down if he attempts to land. A hundred dollars to the one who captures him. Alive, if possible; but dead or alive, anyway."

Along the shore the water was shallower, the current more sluggish.

There was yet time to effect a change of base; and it was too late to go directly up the bank, which every eye would more or less thoroughly watch.

Sometimes wading, sometimes swimming, Myrtle worked her way along the line of the bank, hardly hoping to keep out of sight, and ready at any moment to make a dash up the shore if a shout showed she had been discovered.

By the veriest chance, as it seemed, she passed above the line of the ford, and still the greater part of the attention was turned in the other direction. Keen eyes stared slantingly across the river, watching for the first glimpse of her to direct their course, whilst Murillo and some of his men made their way back. Carlos led the way down along the bank with three or four men, whilst one, shrewder than the rest, patrolled the bank above.

Myrtle heard the movements of the latter and stood stock still, crouching down where the water came to her arms, even at her full height.

With the back of her head to the bank, and only her nose upturned, she had a vague hope that even if he scanned the water she might pass unnoticed.

His attention, however, was fixed upon the shore, where he would be apt to see the first sign of a moving creature, and for perhaps five minutes they stood thus.

Then they heard the voice of Carlos.

"The fool has gone to his own fate. He must have hit bottom like a stone. If he is living—as I doubt—he must have floated on down the stream while we were fooling with the log. Come. We will keep an eye on the bank for a trail out as we go along."

The single horseman on the bank turned and rode away. Shortly after he joined the main party their departing steps died out in the distance.

Miss Mabilee waited a few moments longer before she dared to alter her position or even draw a sigh of relief.

She straightened herself up, brushed the water out of her eyes that ran down her forehead, and attempted to look around her.

Something strange about this.

She had not moved a step, yet there had been a change she could not explain.

Certainly when she first stood there the water only came to her elbows. Had it risen so rapidly?

Now it almost covered her shoulders.

It was time for her to be moving. She tried to turn around.

Then she knew something strange, something horrible.

Totally unconscious of it until this moment, her feet were caught as if in a vise. They refused to answer to her will.

Strangest of all, there seemed to be no reason for it. She might even have thought she had received a paralytic stroke had not her senses told her that every muscle was as obedient to her will as ever. What hindered them from acting?

It was no time now to lose nerve and courage. Vain struggle and idle scream could do no good. She shut her teeth hard together and looked the situation coldly in the face.

The water was still rising. It was over her shoulders now. At this rate in a few moments more it would be at her mouth.

Was it rising?

A wave of recollection swept to her, and she remembered some things she had idly read. No, the water was not rising. It lapped the shore line not an inch higher.

It was she that was sinking, sinking. Her feet were fast in a quicksand.

CHAPTER XI.

DANGEROUS NEIGHBORS.

When Miss Mabilee realized the truth, and that it was now too late for aid to reach her, and the time for hope had passed, there was a thrill of terror through her whole frame.

To be brought face to face with what seemed the certainty of slow, sure, and remorseless death, against which there was no way at all to resist, was an experience new to her. She ground her teeth and clenched her hands in a struggle to keep the coolness which seemed to go away in a great surge.

She remembered all she had read about the quicksand, and knew it was no use to struggle.

It was doubtful if cry of hers could reach Murillo; and if it did, judging from the rate at which she was sinking, he could not come back in time to aid her. She had let the moment for rescue go by, and now nothing could be done.

Nothing? Was that so certain?

Cautiously she tried one foot, and then the other.

Then she took note of the result, and could see she was deeper in the mire than before.

To silently await death was more than human nature could do, and at last it did not seem beneath her to shout for help.

It was no shrill scream, thin with emotion, but a clear, ringing cry for help which would travel far and arouse instantly the ears it fell upon.

Some one might come even at this late moment. Once, twice, thrice, that cry sounded, and then the water was gurgling about her mouth and against nose and ears, with every little ripple of the current. Evidently the last moments were there.

Then she heard the pounding of a horse's hoofs as they struck the hard but sandy soil.

"Help!" again she shouted; and the water gurgled into her mouth and cut off the cry.

She could not even turn her head to look over her shoulder; but the answer came that made her thrill all over with hope.

"Stiddy, gal! Keep yer kerridge up, I'm a-comin'!"

A few seconds later the steed of the horseman halted with a sudden snort.

"Caught in ther quicksand, be ye?" the new arrival queried coolly, looking at the dark spot on the surface of the water.

"I'll git yer out, right enough; but ef you'll be in two pieces, er in one piece, in three quarters, er four halves, 'll 'pend on how tough yer be. Hold yer both han's up, so I kin rope yer onderneath 'em, er I'll strangle yer, sure."

It was no season for questions, or even for remarks, on the part of the victim. The two hands went up, though the effect was to thrust her feet downward a trifle deeper.

The man on the bank gave a skillful twirl of the rope in his hand, and the coil shot out, the noose in the end settling down over the uplifted arms, which dropped across it at once. While life lasted that rope could not be removed until safety was assured.

"Now, et's pull devil, pull baker. Take

et easy; an' ef ye can't take et easy, then be easy ez yer kin. Now!"

What was needed was slow, steady movement. With a word or two, and a touch, the new-comer caused his horse to begin to back slowly, and as the strain came upon the rope he simply seemed to throw his weight to the work.

For a moment Miss Mabilee felt as though she was being torn apart, but it was only for a moment. Out of the death-vise which clutched them her feet were drawn, and dripping, bedraggled, her senses lost in a sudden, death-like faint, she was drawn out upon the bank, where there was no danger of another of nature's traps springing.

The rescuer hastened to aid her, and the flask at his hip was of material assistance. Before long she gasped, gurgled, and sat up.

"Oh, yes, it are me, yer Uncle Solomon. I told yer I'd be 'round, and hyer I am. Now, w'ot's bin goin' wrong with you?"

As yet she was in no condition to answer, but she recognized the voice, and knew that her rescuer was no follower of the senor.

"Mebbe et arn't w'uth while ter ax them question. I got a glimp' ov what war goin' on and tagged along after. I kin onderstand all ther rest; but how in wrath did yer git away?"

In a few words Myrtle explained how she had made her escape.

"Pure sand, that. Ain't one in a hundred ez would a stood thar an' kep' a button on. Ef yer rekivered enough, we better git a move on. Ez they won't find nothin' of yer down the river, et won't be long afore they kim moggin' back—onless thar's some other game afoot ter-night. I kin give yer a ride back ter Grizzly, an' nex' time you jest stay ter h'um an' let yer Uncle Solly run this hyer fandangle. Et's what he's hyer fur."

"Thanks for the advice; but I don't believe I'll take it. How far is it to the ranch? Can it be reached from here?"

"Et ain't prezack'ly a hull day's journey, ner yit would et take all night; but et kin be did."

"Then I go. This has been a mistake on the part of Murillo, and I did not undeceive him, because I thought it might take me within his breastworks. Will you show me the route?"

"I kin do better. I'll go along. Et Carlos gits back yer won't be no wuss off, an' ef he does thar is a wrinkle er two ez I knows ov the. may do yer sum good. Reckon yer dreened off ez well ez kin be expected, an' we better be startin'."

He asked no questions as to what profit was expected from a view of the ranch, but assisted her on his horse, and paced along by her side. He seemed to have the lay of the country at his finger's ends, and several hours later the ranch buildings were in sight.

All was dark about them, however, and the only sign of life was the baying of several hounds. Whether they scented the strangers in the distance, or something nearer claimed their attention, it was plain they were there and on the alert.

"Guess yer ain't thinkin' ov marchin' right in, eh?" asked Solomon.

"No. My clothes have dried enough to be comfortable, and I suspect the best and perhaps the only thing for me to do is to try and get a little rest. The day and night have about worn me out."

The wonder was they had not done it altogether.

Few men would have stood the strain as well; but there was a danger of a break-down before long if it was kept up.

As there was a convenient hiding-place, Myrtle took advantage of it, whilst Six-Foot Sol seated himself near by.

He professed his willingness to remain on guard, but how long he would keep his eyes open never troubled Miss Mabilee, who was asleep almost the moment she closed her eyes. Fortunate it was that the night was pleasant and the clothing warm.

She slept soundly, and there could have been no haunting fear on her mind, or she might have been awakened by sounds which under ordinary circumstances would have caused her to open her eyes.

When they did open, Uncle Solly had vanished; and in his place she saw a sight which sent a thrill all through her frame.

Only a few yards distant, with fiery eyes, raised lips that showed rows of white, gleaming teeth, and altogether wearing the expression of demons about to spring, stood two enormous blood-hounds.

They glared at her savagely, and as her hand shot around toward her revolver, from between their jaws came an ominous pair of growls.

They had found their quarry, and appeared about to spring.

CHAPTER XII.

SIX-FOOT SOL'S BRACE.

It still wanted an hour of day when Carlos Murillo rode up to his ranch.

He was evidently in no good humor, from the way he spoke to the dogs when they came bounding toward him, and as no servant appeared he hastily unknotted the cinches, threw off the saddle, removed the bridle, and allowed his horse to wander off at will while he entered the building.

He threw himself down for rest rather than slumber, though his eyes closed. In an hour or so he rose up renewed. The early dawn was giving place to the firmer light of day when he came out, saddled a horse, and, having released a brace of huge hounds, rode away in the direction of the river. The rest of the canine family, which seemed to surround the ranch, were left behind.

He had an object in view, of course, and once at the river proceeded to carry it out.

Going well above the ford, he produced the hat which had been worn by his prisoner of the night before and gave it over to the grave inspection of his hounds.

Then he led them slowly along the bank toward the ford.

It had only been as a measure of precaution that he begun his investigations so far from the spot where he hoped for results. It was greatly to his surprise when, before they had gone many rods, the hounds suddenly halted and sniffed eagerly at the ground.

They had found the trail almost at the first cast.

But what seemed as strange, they were at once at fault. Over a course of a few rods they worked their way, and then were in doubt. What was the matter?

A close inspection solved the difficulty. The hoof-marks of Uncle Solly's steed were to be discerned, and there was no doubt that the fugitive had ridden away.

To transfer the scent from hat to hoof-tracks was not so hard to do; and away they went on the chase.

Again Murillo was surprised. Before going far he saw the course lay in the direction of the ranch.

By word and gesture he had kept the dogs fairly well under control, but now he forgot them for a moment, and they darted away from him. He was too busy

thinking what this might mean. Was it possible the lad had been rescued by one of his own men?—for he understood the late situation, and knew well of the quicksand on the brink of the river.

When he saw the brutes were already beyond the hearing of his voice, in its ordinary tones at least, he shrugged his shoulders, and muttered:

"As well that way, perhaps, as any other. If the beasts pull him down, it ends the matter. From what I saw of him when I had him they will make short work, and it may be better so. Still, I must be in at the finish. There may be a balk, though he can hardly get away with them both. If he strikes one, the other will pin him. Good dogs. They are not eating the bread of their master for nothing!"

There was one little factor on which he had not counted, and which had not really entered into the calculations of Uncle Solly.

When Myrtle dismounted, Six-Foot Sol received her in his arms and carried her for some little distance to a resting-place. That broke the trail.

When the hounds came to where the horse was tied they gave evidence of wisdom equal in grade to the evident terror of the mustang. They looked the snorting, quivering animal over, seemed to see that it was alone and could go no further, and decided to do it no harm.

For a time they remained motionless, and then, moved by instinct, or perhaps the scent which reached them in spite of the direction of the wind, made their way toward the spot where Miss Mabilee was sleeping.

She was not hard to find, and now they remembered their first scent, and were in doubt whether their mission was to find simply, or to rend. The body was motionless, the eyes closed. They paused in angry doubt.

Just then a sharp whistle pealed out.

The hounds pricked up their ears as if they recognized it; but, though it was evidently a call, they hesitated to obey.

Still glaring on Myrtle, they remained motionless.

It was that whistle which really woke the sleeping girl.

Had she sprung to her feet the forward motion of the hounds would have been instantaneous. As she moved her hand in search of a weapon they growled. It was only chance they did not attack.

Then the whistle sounded once more, and now there seemed to be an imperative shrillness in its tone which caused the animals lingeringly to obey. It may have been their uncertainty as to which was their quarry that caused them to turn; and at the same time the horse which they had trailed thither broke away from the spot where he was tethered and darted in the direction of the sound.

At that they hesitated no longer, but took the trail at once, leaving Myrtle free to rise to her feet and look around her in some trepidation for a convenient tree.

She was not at all sure they had gone for good.

The absence of Solly was not altogether a puzzle.

As there was nothing to be seen of his corpse, she imagined he had taken refuge in flight; and there was nothing to indicate in which way she must go to rejoin him. Certainly she would not follow on the trail of the hounds; nor did she know in which direction lay Grizzly Gulch.

The ranch was the only other point of which she knew the location, and under present circumstances it seemed the one of safety.

Crouching low as she moved, she set her face in that direction, careless of the dangers which might meet her there.

Had she followed the hounds she would perhaps have had a chance to be present at an interview which, at the least, was interesting.

Carlos Murillo, with his eyes fixed ahead, where the dogs had vanished, saw little of what was to be seen on either side. An ambushade was the farthest thing from his thoughts, when he heard a sudden hail:

"You, thar, dog-gun ye, hold up yer han's!"

The call seemed from behind, and swiftly he wheeled his horse, his hands flying to his weapons as he turned; but at the same time he heard a warning:

"Stiddy, boy, stiddy, er down ye go."

To his surprise there was no one in sight, and though his hands rested on the butts of his pistols he did not draw. Unless the challenger was plainly visible there would be no chance for a successful snap-shot against a man who undoubtedly held the drop.

"Step out into the open, curse you, if you want to try which is the better man," he snarled, glaring around.

"Not ef you please. You're good enough, I'll allow, ter pass in a crowd, w'ich are w'y I'm a-talkin' to yer with ther drop. Are yer goin' ter put up yer digitals?"

"No. You're too cowardly to shoot at a man with a gun in his fist, but if I let go you might hit me in the back. What do you want?"

"Want yer ter keep ther peace, in course. Ef yer guns 'll help yer, hold on ter 'em. Ef yer lifts 'em funder, down yer go."

Carlos was still as uncertain where the speaker was located. It even appeared as though he had shifted his position.

He took the side of prudence, and did not raise his hands, but growled:

"Go on, then; there's something behind all this."

"In course. Fust thing, call off yer dogs."

"Better for you if I let them go. If they came they would rend you."

"Call 'em off!"

The tone was harsher and more immediate. Murillo was no bad judge of such things, and he felt delay would be dangerous. His whistle rose; and it was just in the nick of time.

When the dogs did not at once answer the signal was repeated, and then they came.

"Now, you bring 'em ter heel. I ain't yearnin' fur no three-cornered fight; but ef et's got ter kim recommender thet you goes down, right on ther spot, ez Johnny would say. Then I'll take my chances. You understand me?"

"You will have to take your chances, anyhow. I am not sure I can control the brutes if they once get scent of you. What is the meaning of this I don't understand, but you have some object, and it is time you told it. I wait no longer. Speak, or the fight opens."

Murillo was working to gain time, and to locate the unseen man. Until he did that last he was at a disadvantage that he recognized.

At the same time he was not a man to be cowed long by physical danger. When there was nothing further to be gained he was always ready to risk all; and the other man knew it.

"Boss, a short hoss are soon curried. Ef yer got ten thousand fur me, you an' I k'n dicker. Ef not, I'm goin' on ter ther other side."

"What in brimstone do you mean?"

Are you mad, or do you mean highway robbery?"

"Not hafe so mad ez I mout be ef I war 'clined ter let me feelins' talk right out in meetin'. But I'm a-keepin' 'em down. W'ot's all ther feelin's in ther world w'en yer pocket's empty, and you be most nigh ter starvin'. Ten thousand chucks is w'uth all ther mad in Arizony, an' that are whar they grow sich things."

"You hound, you!"

Six-Foot Sol's mustang went tearing past, and Solly's eyes brightened.

"Stiddy! Keep yer own houn's straight, er down yer goes."

It was time the warning came, for the hounds were there. A word from their master might send them circling after their still invisible quarry.

The word was not given. On the contrary, a sharp word of command brought them to heel. Then Carlos went on:

"If you know anything about me, out with it. Go over the whole list of what you would peddle. When you are done I will know whether only to strike you dumb with the truth, or kill you where you stand."

"Jest emagine I knows everything an' then yer got et, and lots ov words is saved. Ef I winks, Government sends a heap-lot ov men down this hyar ways. Ef I whispers to ther jennowine fambly w'ot I kin thar'll be a delergashun 'round afore a month. Ef I hunts up ther remnants ov ther tribe ov Lee, yer kin be lookin' fur 'em on ther spot shortly thar-after. Ef I wanders over ther line I might stir up a ructshun in ther hearts ov ther Murillo fambly. An' all that squelched an' did fur on account ov ther small sum ov ten thousand dollars! Happy hades! Et's too cheap. Speak quick, er I'll rise my prize."

As the voice reeled off all this, Murillo's brow darkened.

"At him!" he shouted suddenly, throwing up his weaponed hands to a level as the figure of Six-Foot Sol rose from the ground behind him, a revolver in either hand. At the same time he wheeled in his saddle, and the dogs launched themselves at the intruder.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNCLE SOLOMON COMES TO GRIEF.

Carlos Murillo saw his dogs rush forward, and believed he had located the voice at last.

It was all quickly done, and he would have taken a snap-shot that would have been certain death had he had but a fraction of a second more.

Solly had the advantage, and played to keep it.

His hand followed Murillo's motion, and just when the frowning face of the ranchero fairly fronted his own he pulled trigger.

Carlos reeled in his saddle, yet his knees gripped tighter, and his hand as though by instinct closed harder on the reins, holding his horse in its tracks, though from his left hand the pistol dropped to the ground. He was not dead, but dazed.

As for the dogs—Solly gave a snort of good-natured contempt, and, doffing his hat, coolly extended it toward them.

"Hyar, you Jeff, you Juno, ef yer knows a good thing when yer sees et smell ov that. Mebbe you'll recommender."

The dogs stopped and looked at him, more or less puzzled by his manner and their memory.

After that first hesitation of theirs he seemed to fear them no more. He put his battered old hat back on his frowzy head and slouched forward, just in time

to catch Murillo as he reeled out of the saddle.

"Gilt-edge ez usu'l," he muttered, feeling the little ridge that his bullet had plowed along the top of the rancho's head, and the slight look of concern left his face.

"On'y tetched him lightly, an' ef he don't hev ary set-back he'll be 'round ag'in in a few minnits. Reckon I better make all ther hay on ther field w'ile ther sun's stinin'."

Without hesitation he removed the weapons of the insensible man, then deftly felt his pockets, making a quick transfer to his own.

He was not too deeply interested in his occupation to allow his surroundings to remain altogether unnoticed.

He had already whipped a cord around the wrists of the insensible man, when suddenly he gave a great start. Whatever might have been his intentions, it was now too late to carry them into effect. Steering straight for the spot, he saw a body of horsemen which he had no trouble in identifying as the men who had ridden behind Carlos the preceding night.

To be captured under such circumstances, with Murillo unable to dictate their course, meant almost certain death for Uncle Solly, and he recognized the fact. The hounds were a factor now which he could not afford to despise. Whilst they might not attack him—indeed, they were inclined to be friendly—they evidently had badly frightened his horse, which otherwise would have come to his call. If they followed him now they would turn the panic into a rout.

"Hyar, June, Jupe! Take keer on him; he needs yer. Watch him, good dogs. I'm goin' fur help."

He spoke in a tone that seemed to invite their confidence, and pointed at the prostrate man. Deliberately and softly he placed the hat of Carlos over his face and made a gesture which the watching canines appeared to understand. They sank down by the side of Murillo with a sigh.

It may have seemed a waste of time, but it only took a few seconds; and after that his movements were free, though he went on with the same deliberation.

"Blast et! ef I whissels now, June an' Jupe'll think I means them; ef I don't Jolly'll kick ag'in ther irregular perceedin's. An' ef he does, hyar's a frolic with all that gang, every man ov 'em a shoot-in' to a hair. Waugh! Et's nas'y mean."

Fortunately, the direction of his mustang was at right angles to the coming crowd, which was already perilously near. With hand outstretched he moved away, without undue haste, and never seeming to notice the approaching cow-boys.

The ranchmen had been puzzled at first, but now understood more of the scene before them. Whilst several kept straight on toward the prostrate body, the rest, with a yell, drew their revolvers and headed for Six-Foot.

Solly held up his hand, the palm toward them, and gently shook it, but he did not pause.

Then "crack, crack!" the bullets began to fly. Knowing how the shooters could send their lead, it was to him almost a miracle that he remained untouched.

The shots were a diversion. The mustang pricked up head and tail.

Once he gave a side glance at Solly, but there was nothing there to alarm him. He stood, with neck craning and nostrils dilated, staring at the approaching whirlwind.

So he was standing when a hand rested for an instant on the saddle. The next instant Solly was astride and away.

"Git along, Jolly," he chuckled, holding the reins with a light touch.

"May ez well feel 'em a weenty bit. Like ez not they'll grow diskerridged."

Without ever losing control of the animal, he sent it away at wondrous speed.

For a few strides, indeed, the pursuers gained; but after that to an onlooker it would have seemed they might as well chase the wind.

Still going easily within its powers, the noble beast hugged the ground with its long, low stride. In a minute the two were beyond pistol-range, and with his face turned toward Grizzly, Solly Sailor believed he could defy pursuit.

A shout caused one of the men who had gone straight on toward Murillo to look up. He took in the situation at a glance, and dropped in on the trail without delay.

He was magnificently mounted, and rode one-half lighter than Uncle Solly. If the horseflesh was only even, the weight would tell.

Then ensued such a race as those men there had never before seen, though Solly was all unconscious. His attention was entirely directed to another danger which rose up in front of him.

The shots and shouts had not passed unheard, and three men, toward whom he had been unsuspectingly riding, made their appearance, and did not hesitate to show by actions that they were decidedly hostile.

They placed themselves directly athwart the course of the fugitive, and with ready weapons awaited his approach.

Solly rose in his stirrups and took a survey of the lay of the land. Of course, he could not turn back. On the one side the natural roughness of the ground warned him it was no place for a race. On the other lay the ranch, at no great distance. It was not the direction he would have chosen if it could have been avoided, since there was no telling what force might appear from that quarter, where the noise of the difficulty had no doubt been heard.

It was, however, the best course so far as he could see, and, believing he could distance the new arrivals and ultimately flank them, he turned sharply, at the same time looking back.

They turned, too, and started off at a rapid gait, but a second glance showed he had the heels of them. At the rate at which he was going there seemed no earthly chance of their overtaking him, even though the change would give them the shorter line.

He did not see a young rancho, clad in Mexican garb, nor the gesture he made. In that way it came to pass that the pursuer crept nearer and nearer, swinging the rope his right hand grasped, and all ready for a cast, until the thud of hoofs not far behind called Six-Foot Sol's attention to the new factor in the game.

Then he humped his back as though expecting momentarily to feel a bullet, and spoke sharply to Jolly.

He was too late. The Mexican was within casting distance. Suddenly the noose left his hand and came hurtling through the air. A little shadow flitted before Sailor's eyes, and then the rope was around his shoulders.

Had the conditions been a trifle more favorable the man with the lasso might have chosen to rope horse instead of rider; but, as it was, he took no chances, and as the running loop tightened Uncle Solly was swept from the saddle.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOME SURPRISES.

As they saw the fugitive pulled down, the men in the rear turned back and rode toward where some of their comrades were bending over the form of the still insensible Murillo.

There seemed little doubt their comrade could handle his capture, and the three new-comers would be with him in a moment to aid. After such a bursting fall, the chance was the neck of the stranger was broken, anyhow.

Six-Foot Sol lay flat on his back, one leg doubled under him, and without a sign of life in his whole frame. There looked to be no more danger in him, and the man who had made the cast evidently thought there was none.

He sprung from his horse, which was standing like a statue, and rushed to the side of his victim. He had him at his mercy; but it was the lasso he was after, and swiftly he removed the noose, giving but a careless glance at the captive as he did so.

Then he was rushing back to his horse, coiling the "rope" as he went. With but scarce a minute's delay he was again in the saddle; and now his intention was apparent. The animal which Sailor had ridden was no mean prize. With such a weight up as its late rider it had shown a speed and training that made it almost beyond price to a man whose life was in the saddle, and whose fortunes were dependent on horseflesh.

Jolly was not at all panic-stricken. When the loop came darting over him he squatted in his saddle, and it was at that instant his rider fell. Another bound or two and he was almost at a canter, looking around as if to see what had happened. By the time the Mexican was again in the saddle he was prancing around, uncertain whether to go look at his master or remove himself further out of danger.

Even when the pursuit began he was evidently undecided on anything, except that he must keep out of the range of the rope.

If he had measured it with a yard-stick he could not seemingly have gauged its length with more exactness.

More than once the arm of the Mexican went up, but dropped again without the throw being made. At that moment a fierce bound almost took Jolly just beyond range.

The game attracted attention, and there were others who would have been glad to have joined in it on a signal, but while the fight was so even, honor, and perhaps the revolver of the Mexican, kept them out. For the time Sailor was actually forgotten, and when Murillo recovered his senses, dazed though he remained for a little, every one was free to take in the spectacle, which every man there was able to appreciate.

It was a fight between a man who was a master of his trade and a horse that seemed to be one of the noblest, yet wildest, of his kind.

Even Carlos was caught in contagious enthusiasm, and, rubbing away the blur over his eyes, watched the game in which the brute was making dangerous play with the man who well might turn out his master when some little slip had given him the advantage.

When some of the party would have moved forward, perhaps to join in the game, it was Carlos who kept them back.

"Stay with me, curse you; or, if you must leave, go look after the infernal tramp. You say he is down—let me

know for sure his neck is broken. Until then, I own up, I am afraid of him."

Without knowing it, he was playing into the hands of what well might be called the enemy.

Jolly was working further away with every circle he took, though as yet he was in plain view. Half a dozen times the horse had foiled the efforts of his pursuer, yet each time it seemed to be a closer thing of it. The nerves of the watchers became more and more highly strung as they watched the game. Even Murillo forgot everything else.

"Ah," he muttered at last; "he has him now!"

It looked like it, indeed.

The Mexican, on the inner line, was following, just out of distance.

He knew that an unsuccessful cast would probably end the game for good, and that it had only been prolonged thus long because the horse hesitated to leave his master.

It was this hesitation, more than anything else, which made him desirous of effecting the capture. Such a steed was doubly worth the having.

Suddenly Jolly made a swerve, tossing his head as if in play.

The danger to him lay in the fact that the swerve was made to the wrong side.

He lost half a dozen yards, first and last; and the coil in the Mexican's hand shot out. Yet, at the very instant of the cast, or, rather, just before its full impetus was finished, a strange thing happened.

Rising right from the plain was a puff of smoke, and the report of a pistol, subdued by the distance, reached the ears of the watchers, a quarter of a mile or more away.

The Mexican reeled in his saddle, whilst his horse, which had halted at the throw, again stood like a rock.

Before either horse or rider could recover from the surprise a lithe figure darted up from the ground, and, springing at the wounded man like a wildcat, canted him out of the saddle.

"On the spot!" laughed the newcomer, as he swung himself in the vacated seat and snatched up the reins.

"Ta, ta! I'll see you all later!"

Even at that distance Carlos Murillo recognized the figure which so suddenly sprang into sight and action.

"After him!" he shouted, pointing wildly.

"He is my meat. Five hundred to divide among you if you catch him; as much if you kill him. Dead or alive, take him! Where is my horse? I'll follow him to the death!"

Though he had staggered somewhat through weakness and excitement, Murillo straightened up when he had thrown himself astride the horse.

"Two of you look after that ragamuffin!" he exclaimed, with the promptings of second thought, pointing in the direction of the spot where Solly had taken his tumble. "If he is dead, bury him. If he is living, keep his mouth shut, but take him where I can find him. There are some things he must say before he dies—if it is not too late."

He was away as he spoke, and the two pointed out rode off. Until they heard the order they had forgotten. The chase had driven the thought of the burly stranger altogether out of their heads.

Now, when they looked in the direction toward which Carlos had pointed they failed to find the spot for which they looked. They scanned the plain in vain for that contorted heap which they were certain they had seen but a few minutes before.

"Great grizzlies! be we turned 'round?" asked one of the pair, as he gave a keener glance ahead, and then turned to sweep the ground in every direction.

"No. Yonder go the marks of Manuel's mustang. Satan hath helped his own; the man is missing."

"Fur a fact he be; but whar are he gone to?"

Both of them felt something like a superstitious thrill, for in the nature of things it did not seem as though he could have so utterly vanished without being aided by some supernatural agency.

"Thar's whar he fell, sure gun, an' plumb center shootin'; but whar am he now? Thar ain't no live man ez could take that tum'mle an' then git up an' move off 'thout bein' seen."

They had reached the spot where the noosing occurred, and for the sharp eyes looking for it there was little trouble in finding where Six-Foot Sol hit mother earth in his fall. If he was dead, he ought to be there yet. If living, how could he possibly have withdrawn unseen? They did not make due allowance for the excitement caused by the subsequent chase and all that followed.

They were reasonably keen of sight, however; and when they looked it over more carefully it seemed that the miraculous had happened. Though the breath might have been knocked out of the man at the first, yet he had recovered sufficiently to crawl off while they were all watching the chase by Manuel.

There were marks to indicate the trail; and the latter led straight toward the ranch. Without hesitation the two followed. It was hardly likely the fugitive would have strength to carry him either fast or far.

Surely he must have turned off a little further on, where a crack in the plain—an offshoot of the great baranca—would offer a place of seeming concealment. Their glances were in that direction, even while they followed the trail; and while they were thinking so some one rose up in front of them, with outstretched hands and menacing pistols.

"Great Sathanas!" muttered the Mexican trailer, "it is the accursed gringo who rode away on the mustang of Manuel. 'Tis sorcery, sure!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BLACK THREAD LYING ON THE PLAIN.

When Johnny made the leap to the back of the mustang he had captured he knew that he was taking great chances. He was a judge of horseflesh when he saw it, and had a pretty clear idea that about this animal there was a spice of wickedness which might land him in a worse plight than that danger of being run down as he lay hugging the ground, right in the course of horse and rider.

Fortunately, the stirrups fitted him fairly well, his feet swung to place as if by instinct, and he would have had no fears for a fight had he been alone with the brute. But if it once started a struggle for the mastery he knew his capture was certain.

Nothing of this appeared in his tones, which rang out clear and laughing; and when, with all the confidence in the world, he applied his heel to the side of his mount, the animal answered without a second of delay; and at that moment he knew, if he could get the best out of it of which it was capable, he was reasonably safe from pursuit.

"Kind of a pity his head is turned in the wrong direction, and it's not just so easy to get on to the trail. If it wasn't for that, I might troll them right into

Grizzly, and have a little talk in open meeting. Perhaps I can do it yet."

So he thought to himself, and looking back steadied the pace to one which he thought would keep him fairly ahead while he was mapping out his course. He had seen about all that had been going on, and knew just as well as Solly Sailor had done that it would not do to fall into these hands which were reaching after him.

His pursuers were spreading out in a fan shape, and he noticed there were a couple on the right flank who were almost abreast of him.

Then, "crack!"

The sharp report of a rifle echoed on the air—and Johnny suddenly drooped sideways in the saddle, whilst a sharp yell arose from the rear.

Was he down?

Not a bit of it.

He rose again, as straight and fearless as ever, and handled the mustang with the same matchless skill he had displayed from the beginning.

That bullet had come uncomfortably near, but whether he had dodged involuntarily, as most men will who are not case-hardened, or whether it was a bit of play, was hard to tell.

The yell was from Murillo, who at the same time made motions which all understood. No more shots were fired.

"The accursed gringo! he laughs at us!" savagely shrieked one of the Mexicans, as he ranged up to the side of his leader. "See! He does not urge the mustang like one who fears. When Natan fired he dodged at the flash. Shoot the beast, or the boy will escape!"

In another moment the carbine would have been at his shoulder, and Johnny was not out of carbine range.

"Hold, Felipe! We must have the mustang as well as the boy. If Manuel is dead I will pay the widow more than a fair price. I have wanted him more than once."

"Perhaps I can throw him out of the saddle, even at this distance, the mustang runs so level and true."

"Run no such risk. If Natan could not bring him down, for the rest of us there is little chance. We will have him yet!"

"As thou wilt; but he plays with us now to give himself room. When the time comes he will drive in spurs, and who can follow?"

"Of that we will take care. Light weight though he is, Diavolo will not take him beyond our line on the one side, and on the other the ground hems him in."

"I wager no onzas on that. We know not how fast Diavolo can go, but he hath the wings of the morning, and to this time hath never been beaten."

"When Manuel rode him. And, being a mustang without price, better to spend the day in the chase and have him at last than lose such a wonder. Besides, there is the barranca. Crowd him a trifle more from the right, and if he goes on a mile he will find it across his path, and to the left. Then, we close in, thou and I, having nursed our mustangs. We are near enough to fling a rope; and, once his rider off, Diavolo will trot by our sides as a pet sheep would do."

"The barranca; yes. But if he rides at it with heel to flank, and sees it not in time, we lose them both."

"I chance it. Diavolo is no fool. It is a bet of a hundred that when he stops short on the brink he flings his rider."

"What Diavolo might do if he really tried I know not; but for start or stop the two part not company. No Apache-

ever rode better. How comes he here? Why was he not drowned in the river?"

"Hist! I know not. Look!"

Carlos rose in his stirrups as he spoke, and cast a long, keen look ahead.

Just then the boy was casting a backward glance, and, seeing the movement, smiled grimly.

"More to follow, as they say in the morning papers. If Sport Mac was here we might stand off the crowd; but I guess it's too heavy a contract for me to undertake alone. What is the dandy little tiger looking for?"

Had he been bred to the spot he might have suspected, and, stranger to the country though he was, he began to guess a trap. Since they carried rifles, he knew it was possible for the pursuers to drop the horse that he bestrode, even if they failed to strike him. That it had not been done aroused his suspicions.

It was natural enough they should desire to capture such an animal as he was riding; but, when it was plain that could not be done on the line they were following, they must have some scheme behind their mercy.

Still, nothing appeared in front, and pursuers and pursued thundered on without any change in their relative positions, save that the men on the flank, by taking a straighter course, appeared to have gained in the race, even though they were farther away.

All this in spite of the fact that he had been increasing the pace. One thing, though: he was jockey enough to note that while his own horse was going easily those of the others were laboring visibly in their stride, and, though perhaps still good for a long run, could not greatly increase their speed. Diavolo, on the contrary, answered to his slightest touch, and was good for a grand rush whenever called on.

Johnny peered anxiously ahead, but could see no danger on the plain, which seemed to stretch on for miles.

Another glance to the rear showed the men behind were more widely spread than ever. Evidently, they did not mean to allow him a chance to flank them by any sudden burst of speed. They were trying their best to drive him straight onward.

What did that mean?

He recalled the look of Carlos as he rose in his saddle, and again he looked warily at the ground ahead.

That revealed nothing; but now, Diavolo—he did not know the horse by that name—gave him warning.

He threw up his head, seemed to sweep the ground with his eyes, whilst a distinct though scarcely perceptible tremor ran through his frame.

There was danger near! As the boy suddenly realized the fact, he heard a shout of warning from his rear.

Once more he cast his glance to the front and caught a glimpse of what might be before him.

Something like a huge black thread lay across his path, not far away.

What it was came to him like an inspiration. On these fervent plains there are places where the ground has seemingly cracked open for miles, making a chasm which may be measured across by feet or rods, as the case may be.

It is doubtful if he remembered ever having heard of a baranca; but he knew something of this kind was before him, and knew from the actions of his pursuers that they judged it was too broad for him to leap.

There was yet time for him to turn aside; but he never flinched, nor did his steed waver.

He could see plainer with every stride, and there were not many more to take. The baranca appeared fearfully wide; but, with a shrill cry, he urged Diavolo forward, giving him his head to take the leap or refuse, as he should choose.

The mustang seemed to crouch lower in its stride and quicken its pace of its own accord.

Then, with a fierce snort, Diavolo leaped out into space!

CHAPTER XVI.

"I'M JUST JOHNNY ON THE SPOT."

Forty-two feet to an inch—three feet farther than the famous Chandler jump over water—did the black mustang cover in that one terrible stride!

That done, he went skimming away, whilst from the boy came floating back the laughing cry:

"Johnny's on the spot. Hoop la!"

In that moment of intense excitement the pursuers forgot to shoot, and something like a cheer arose. Not a man there but knew the wonderful thing which had been done, and not a man there dared try to follow.

For the present Johnny was safe from pursuit, and even a rifle ball would scarcely reach him.

After a little, the boy drew in his mount, and, raising his hand, fluttered a white handkerchief as a signal for truce.

There was a trifle of hesitation; then Carlos answered in the same way. He had a desire to hear what the youngster had to say.

It did not take long for Johnny to explain by gestures the conditions of the truce, and the two advanced to the opposite edges of the baranca.

"Say, party, the first thing you want to understand is that I don't want to steal this mustang. I'll give five hundred cash for him if you can bring the owner to a dicker; but that's as he says. I'll turn him loose right here, or leave him anywhere you say in Grizzly. You sabe?"

"Leave him with Winters, near the Gem, and that part will be all right," answered Murillo, scrutinizing closely the looks of this cool young hand.

"Next, I want you to take it all in that if harm comes to the youngster you tried to kidnap last night, in front of the Gem, there will be a settlement that may come a heap harder than you have been counting on. Sport Mac generally keeps his end up; but he's not the only one who knows where the party went, and will be wanting to know some other things shortly; and they'll want to know mighty hard. Tote fair, or Grizzly will all be out with a rope."

"Ah! you threaten, do you?"

"Threaten? Bless your soul! what would I be threatening for? I'm not of the size to do that. I just give you a bit of warning. I'm not certain but what I would be your friend if you would let me. That don't seem to be in the wood; so I say, step mighty slow!"

"Stay! There seems to be some mistake in all this. Who are you?"

"That's just what I'd like to know. For the present I'm just Johnny—Johnny on the spot. When I know more I'll tell you better. Be good to yourself, old man, while you have the chance. It looks as though it was going to be an awful dry time for corn. So long!"

The boy turned airily away. It is true, there was a good forty-two feet between them; but a pistol ball would cover that distance, and the hand of Carlos was fumbling for a weapon as he turned.

"I can't do it," muttered the ranchero.

"It may be life or death on it; but with that white rag floating the men ought to shoot me down if I forget myself. Let him go. It is a pity to lose all the big stake I have played for—and such a game! Am I a coward, or has the time come to retreat? Best go back to the ranch and take counsel."

The escape of the youth was something between a nightmare and a miracle; and, as the several Mexicans of the party were, above all things, superstitious, ominous looks were on most of the faces, which a mile of hard riding scarcely cleared away.

"The infernal tramp—was he dead or dying?" murmured Carlos to himself, as he saw the two sent to dispose of Solly coming toward him.

"Jose I can trust; but Bart Bender would sell his soul for a dollar. It will not be well if he knows too much. How was it, Jose?"

"Satan was in it, senior. Look!"

His eyes glanced downward toward his hands, which were held awkwardly before him.

Murillo saw they were tied to the horn of his saddle; and, glaring over at Bart, he noted that he was in the same predicament!

"Carejo! The meaning? Quick! Was a dead man too much for thee? Or is this a bit of treachery? You are none too good to sell the fawning dog his life."

"Thar warn't much ov ther fawn 'bout him," broke in Bart.

"Never got caught jest quite so bad in my life afore. Tell yer how it war, boss—hope may die! Now we see'd 'em, an' ag'in we didn't. An' w'ile we war lookin' 'round fur ther corpus ez hed suddenly vanished, ther spook ov ther kid ez wur drowned, an' kim ter life, an' throwed pore Manuel cold, an' rid off with his mustang, he jest stepped outen ther clouds, all smilin' an' serene, with both barrels turned on us, riddy ter cut loose. An' thar war that tramp a sottin' thar, with two barrels more-over, an' him a dead shot! When they sez 'wilt!' we jest wilted, an' you kin wring me out fur a dishcloth an' hang me up ter dry."

"And then?"

"Then Six-Foot Sol kep' us kivered, an' ther kid tied our han's this hyar way, tole us ef we looked 'round we'd stay looked, an' ter light out. So, we lit."

"Curses on you for blundering fools! Afterwards, which way did they go?"

"A'rterwards, when we looked 'round, they wasn't thar."

Carlos stared doubtfully at the two. There had been times in his life when he would have shot them down for such carelessness; but now he was in an uncertain mood.

"Cut them loose!" he ordered, harshly, and again led the way in silence, his pace quickened by the sight of a horseman in the distance, who seemed to be riding furiously for the ranch.

Almost in front of the buildings their courses would have intersected, and it was there the newcomer drew in and awaited the others.

"Quick!" he shouted, with a wave of his hand. "No time to lose. The blue devils are on the trail, and will be here within the hour."

"Ha! Are you sure?"

"Truly, for I counted them in their camp at sunrise, and watched them until I saw they had found the trail. Better would it have been if you had not turned back."

"Caramba! I knew of them, and should have made things safe before this had I not wasted an hour. Get ready the wagon, Pedro! In half an hour everything must be away. Half a dozen follow me to the vault. There is yet time to hide it all and be safe. The river will cover it well, and if we mark the spot it will not be a loss."

"Guess yer 'way off, boss. Travelin' ain't healthy, an' exercise 'd be bad fur yer liver! Stay right thar, boss; stay right thar! Ett's yer uncle Solly ez sez ett, an' I guess he knows what he's talkin'."

At the window, from which he had heard every word, Six-Foot Sol looked down upon them, and at his shoulder stood another figure looking strangely like that of the boy they had recently left beyond the barranca!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DUNGEON IN THE VAULTS.

Myrtle Mabilee, moving off toward the ranch, had come suddenly upon the body of Sol.

He was hugging the ground so successfully that, had he not been directly athwart her path, she might not have seen him.

She bent over him long enough to be assured that he was living.

"Ah! this time I am the one to come on the spot. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why did you desert me?"

"All ov 'em good 'uns; but this ain't no riddle contest, an' you kin jest take ther cake an' do yer own answerin'. Reckon ett ain't no use ter tell yer ter light out. They'll be back on yer afore ye kin run a rod. Keep up yer keridge, though, an' ef they axes yer about Uncle Solly jest say to 'em, 'Who's him?'"

He spoke despondently, but Myrtle was not to be daunted.

"While there is life there is hope."

"Ov hevin' yer throat cut by a blamed greaser—yaas. Run along ef yer think ett's in ther wood ter give 'em ther slip; but, hevin' a broke leg, an' otherwise affected, I reckon I'll stay right hyar."

"Don't give up the ship. Cannot we slip to the ranch while they are wasting their time over that horse? Once there who knows what might not turn up? There would be some chance for a fight that would bring them to terms."

"Try ett on; try ett on; but Solly are nothin' now but an old cripple with one leg an' no brains. Farewell, farewell, an' give my love to ther widder Sailor."

"Are you really unable to move, or are you simply a coward? If I was sure it was the last I might shoot you where you lie. There are some things you might tell which would make it unpleasant for me."

The tone of scorn acted like a spur. The Six-Footer struggled to a sitting posture.

"Coward yerself! Ef yer say fight, fight she are! We kin die right hyar."

"Not die, but conquer. Hist! They are coming now!"

"Snuggle down, then, an' we'll try fur a joyful surprise—all ther joy bein' on our side."

This was the way it happened that the two ambuscaded Jose and Bart Bender, with the result already described.

It turned out to have been the simplest way of disposing of their captives to bind them in the saddle and turn them adrift. Scarcely had they gone a rod when Myrtle was for action.

"I have some doubt whether that bone is altogether broken, and in that case even it is worth while to make a trial. Lean on me, and hobble along as best

you can. We may reach a better vantage ground even yet."

"Reckon ther gittin' inside ov the ranch are what's botherin' yer, an' you ain't a keerin' ha'fe ez much fur Six-Foot Sol ez yer lets on. But, I'll try an' be with yer, leetle one. Ef I can't walk I kin crawl; ef I can't crawl I kin roll. Sail in, an' we'll see what she amounts to!"

The journey to the ranch was really the most magnificent specimen of pure grit on the part of the man who made it; and without him Myrtle would have fared but badly when she reached it. As it was, she shrank a little closer to the ragged individual she was supporting as the half dozen dogs left there by Carlos came trooping toward them, open-mouthed and noisy.

"Take ett easy, sis! I knows ther hull ov 'em, an' what I don't know'll take ther docktrin' frum ther rest."

Then, he whistled softly, spoke a few words, almost at random, and in a minute had the whole gang rabidly anxious to greet him, not seeming to notice that, though moving with apparent openness, in reality he was approaching the house with cautious stealth. How many occupants, and of what kind, the ranch might have, were questions to be solved with care.

An open door offered them an entrance, of which they took swift advantage. Once inside, they explored from room to room until Sol threw himself down.

"I can't go no fuder, gal. You look 'round fur a hidin' place, an' I'll take my chances with Carlos when he comes. Ef this thing keeps up much longer I'll begin ter howl."

"Do not give up. I will look around. The cellar may have secrets. Any room may tell its tale. So far, we may have acted like fools; but it is a foolishness which may win."

"Git a move on, then. I begin ter feel ez though I war goin' ter groan."

It was only instinct which led her to search for the vaults, and it was chance enabled her to find them. She heard a footstep, and following, pistol in her hand, Myrtle was led to the lower regions.

A man was carrying a pail in one hand, a lantern in the other, and, as she watched him from behind a half-open door, her heart beat with the thought of what that might mean.

Under the ranch buildings the cellar stretched away, long, silent and gloomy.

She forgot Uncle Solly, and cared nothing for her line of retreat, but followed with a step as light as the fall of a thistle-down. It was fearsome work; but the dauntless girl never wavered, even though she found herself in a narrow passage, where discovery was certain if the man looked around.

When at last he halted in front of something which seemed to be a door let into the wall, Myrtle Mabilee felt like clapping her hands. An end was reached to her journey, and hope as well as curiosity demanded that she should see what lay behind that door. Her steps fell even lighter than ever, and it was the cold muzzle of a cocked pistol, pressed against the nape of the neck of the man she considered a jailor, which announced her presence.

"A word, a cry, a struggle or a sound, and you are a dead man!"

Without the least hesitation or semblance of fear, she spoke. The fellow stood trembling, and had not even presence of mind enough to drop the lantern.

"Now, lay yourself down at full

length, with your hands above your head. Obey, and you shall not be harmed. Refuse, and you shall die."

Without hesitation, he obeyed.

"Now, the key!"

"I swear to you there is none. Search me, if you do not believe. It is a solid wall, and the food goes through a grated turnstyle. Who is there, or what, I know not. Have mercy!"

Myrtle held up the lantern, and saw that it was as the man had said. No glimmering of light could she see within; and when she called there was no answer. A horrible fear overcame her, and she stood trembling.

A shrill whistle reached her ears, coming through the doorways she had left open behind her; and, recognizing the signal of Uncle Sol, she turned and fled to join him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SACKING OF THE RANCH.

Myrtle reached her ally just in time to see the approaching force.

Solly had not allowed himself to be caught napping, and, as he pointed out Carlos, he added:

"Now, fur ther grand bluff. Ef we kin hold 'em off a bit thar may be sum hope yit. Ef we don't we kin calkerlate ter go over ther border on right smart ov a jump, an' never git back again."

Sailor was playing for delay, and had no objections to a conference. For that reason, he disclosed himself, though he knew the risk he was taking.

But, Carlos had lately had one experience with this defiant intruder, and was in no haste to have him open the ball from his post of vantage.

Startled though he was, he took the matter complacently, and answered, in apparent honesty:

"Old man, you can have your choice. We'll call it off for the present, if you say so; and I'll engage to furnish horses to take you and your friend there back to Grizzly, if you start at once. If you don't accept that offer, we are taking no chances, but we'll smoke you out and shoot you when you come, if we have to burn the ranch down to do it. That is our answer."

"That might be straight talk, ef you war only honest; but I ain't a keerin' ter trust jest quite ter that extent. S'posin' you begun ter shoot w'en we begun ter walk out, whar would we be at, eh?"

"I mean every word I say. I have more than half a mind to leave the old shack, anyway. If I do, what is it to me whether it stands or burns? I'd sooner see it burn than lose the life of one of these boys. As for myself, shoot if you dare!"

"I dare, but I don't keer. Git back to ther rest ov ther crowd an' then open ther ball. We'll see who kims out jay-bird."

Carlos moved away as carelessly as though Six-Foot Sol was not on the pistol line. All the time Myrtle was whispering:

"For Heaven's sake, make terms if you can. I will come again with all Grizzly behind me. I can buy them if they will not come of their own accord. I have found the mystery!"

"Then, they'll never let us go alive. All we got ter do are ter stay on our own hook; an', ef we can't hold 'em off, an' help don't kim, take our gruel."

"Help! From whence can we expect it? See! The wretch meant what he said. We are lost!"

With what, even to Solly, seemed like strange promptness, preparations for the sacrifice were being made. The bluff of the old tramp had won, but not after the

fashion he had hoped for. No risks would Carlos run, and the two in the trap would be extinguished without much chance to make their teeth meet.

Six-Foot Sol was convinced at last.

"Gal, ef yer sees ther chance yer better make a break. I'm crippled, an' I know he'd never let me go alive a'ter what I told him. I may go up ther flume and I may not; but I'd like ter save you. Shake!"

He held out his paw, and she clasped it.

"It is not for good-by. If we cannot beat them off we die here together. Let us open the ball."

"It's too late! Don't yer see? He's found he can't move what he hez ter conceal, an' he's goin' ter let the ashes make a hidin' place. He'd fire ther place anyhow. We be on'y incerdents. Don't yer smell ther smoke on t'other side?"

Sure enough, the smell of the burning grass came clearly to her senses. Unless she made a rush, in which Solly could not join her, she could not even have the encouragement of a fight.

"Ett'll go like tinder," Six-Foot Sol said, solemnly, squinting out to note that several men watched that side of the building, at long range. "Ett looks like a fool's sacrifice; but he gits a great big heap of satisfackshun outen it, anyhow."

"My heavens! What can I do? Not for myself—but if sister lives!"

Myrtle clasped her hands and looked around her wildly; then fled from the room, darting back once more to the cellars.

Once below, she saw ahead of her the lantern; but the attendant had vanished. She rushed to the grating and beat upon the solid rock. She called through the barred turnstyle; and then, when hope was leaving, her wandering hands pressed heavily upon a spring, and the wall began to give. At the same time she heard Uncle Solly groan as he dragged himself to the door above.

"This way, if you want to save two lives!"

Johnny had made a circuit, had crossed the line of the barranca, and was drifting back toward the ranch, when he came within hail of a body of men who were in pursuit of a wagon, the driver of which had lashed his horses to a gallop.

"And who are you?" asked the leader of the men, making a sign for the rest to rein up.

"Johnny on the Spot, for the present. Six-Foot Sol and a young lady are somewhere over there, in the hands of the gang which follows Carlos Murillo; and, if I'm not away off in my estimate of them, they will mean murder before it is over. If you are white men, help them."

"We are white men, and that is just the crowd we are after. They are cattle raiders, and we suspect them of something worse. We thought they were in advance of the wagon. Two men can follow that. The rest for the ranch!"

And so it happened that the party of soldiers and secret service agents swept up to the ranch, with Johnny at their head.

They came from an unexpected quarter, so that the men watching for them were evaded, and the first thing Carlos Murillo knew of their approach was seeing the whole force, not a dozen rods away, swirling down upon them in a headlong charge. The smoke from the conflagration he had started had ob-

scured the view, and the jaws of a great trap were closing on him.

The odds were all with the assailants, in point of numbers, and the benefit of the surprise was also with them.

"Surrender!" shouted the leader; and with that the work began.

With the attacking party came Johnny, and he was not far from the head. When the others began shooting, his revolver cracked also; but he had an eye chiefly for Murillo, and suddenly, singling him out, rode straight at him, shooting as he came.

A defective cartridge clicked under the hammer of Murillo's pistol, and then, beaten by both luck and skill, the boy had him. He went sprawling down.

Careless of the fight around him, the boy leaped upon him with both feet, and, levelling his revolver again, he shouted:

"You infernal fraud! I'm certain of you now! Where is the better man than you, whose name and house you have stolen? Speak, or I send you over the range, and find him myself!"

A black look of hate flamed over the face of the wounded man, who, with a shattered arm, could no longer grasp a pistol. With the other hand he feebly pointed to the flaming building and hissed:

"There! In the vaults under that. He stole the woman I loved, and I swore I would steal all that he had. If I could have lived an honest life it would never have been known. His name is Murillo no more than mine, and there were few living who could tell the difference. I knew you were a Jennowine when I saw you, and if my men had not played the fool I would have had you off the stage before you reached Grizzly. Now, live and suffer, knowing that had it not been for you your brother might have lived for years. As it is, when the roof falls in he dies!"

"Liar! For once your hate misses its mark. Yonder he comes now!"

It was true. Bursting out from the smoke and flame came two walking corpses—those of a man and a woman, whilst behind them a bedraggled, boyish-looking individual half dragged, half supported the form of Six-Foot Sol!

The false Murillo fell back, fainting, whilst the service men, victorious at all points, were ready to take good care of all captives.

Johnny darted away instantly.

All the months of confinement in the dungeon by the false ranchero and secret outlaw chief had not broken the spirit of the captives, or done them permanent harm. Though Johnny had grown up out of his brother's recollection since last they met, the reunion was none the less joyful; whilst Myrtle Mabilee, having found her sister living and the wife of a true man after all, was in high spirits, even for her.

The joyous little party went to Grizzly that same night, and when the news of the affair got abroad and it was understood that the Carlos Murillo of late months had been a false presentment of the man whom they had scarcely more than known by sight, and that Captain Zip had often taken a hand socially with the best of them, there was great excitement in Grizzly, and a reception was given the late captives and their friends, to which came all the dignitaries, even Abiram Weintzheimer being present, trying to say some soft nonsense to the woman who had captivated them all, and so signally succeeded in her mission.

Sport Mac got in a little late, and was met by an indignant Johnny.

"Say, Sport, where have you been while all this was going on? It looked

as though you had left me in a hole; but I'm willing to hear explanations."

"Can I trust you?"

"On the dead level."

"Then, I don't mind saying I was on the spot myself. I didn't mean you to know it; but I do a little tracking myself, along with my side pard, Six-Foot Sol, who is doing well and will come out jaybird yet. I went off to hunt up the boys, and I got them there just in time; but my own horse was played out, and I wasn't sorry not to give myself away."

Captain Zip recovered from his wound, and subsequently went to serve his country in the penitentiary. The Murillo family retained the name assumed by Charles Jennowine when he first made a fortune in old Mexico, and with a brace of relatives they went East.

Myrtle's mission at Grizzly was successfully ended!

THE END.

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